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Cochin Chronicle

TRACING 150 YEARS OF THE CITY'S HISTORY

Cochin Chamber of Commerce and Industry newsletter

BACK IN TIME

Curry puffs and Claus on elephant-back

Karen Shaw has a happy 'homecoming' fifty years after she left Kerala with her parents

Santa Claus riding in on the back of an elaborately decorated elephant for the Christmas celebration at the Cochin Club; the photographs are in black and white, but the memories come flooding back in full colour. Over fifty years since her family left Kerala for England, Karen Shaw, whose father Edward Hugh Taylor, managed the Bonacaud tea estate near Ponnudi in Thiruvananthapuram,

has returned with husband Gerry and some lovingly-preserved photos, taken in the 1940s and 50s of the old streets of Cochin and the estates, where she lived with her parents. Karen's father Edward, or Jimmy as he was called, had served in the Indian Army during WWII and met her mother, Joey, who was a nurse working in South Africa. Jimmy had drunk some alcohol to

ease the pain of a broken jaw and Joey had watched over him. After the war, the couple came to Kerala. Though the Taylors left Kerala when she was

nine, Karen, who was born in Neyyar in 1947, has some memories of "being one of the naughtiest girls in school",

Continued on page



School for action

CUSAT's prestigious management school was started in premises borrowed from FACT

It started out as an education institute in an improvised location with a class that had a student, who at 48 years, was older than the institute's director. But today, Cochin University of Science and Technology (CUSAT) is one of the leading institutes in the country with more than 20 faculties, 30 departments and 8,000 students.

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A LITTLE HISTORY

Riding the crest

Aspinwall changed hands a few times and went through a few upheavals before the company took the shape it has today

There is something about Aspinwall that makes it seem not only a business organisation, but as a real part of the history of Fort Cochin. Perhaps it is the name, which suggests an old-world grandeur, and perhaps it is the majestic waterfront office that was the company's head-office till recently, before it shifted base to a more modern premises in Edapally in Ernakulam. Aspinwall, whose core businesses include shipping and logistics, coffee, rubber and coir, traces its origins to Oughterson Campbell & Co. It was established in 1844 and was one of the first organised trading ventures in Cochin. J. Oughterson and Campbell, the partners in the company, did business in timber, ship building and general trading.

The large free-hold property on the waterfront in Calvetty, Fort Cochin, on which the Aspinwall offices were situated for over a century and a half, was bought in a court auction in 1846.

The premises were extended in 1853 by taking over from the collector of the East India Company a 99-year lease of the adjoining plot, called Albuquerque Basin, which was named after Albuquerque, who led a Portuguese expedition to Cochin and landed here in 1503.

The partnership between Oughterson and Campbell was dissolved in 1851 and Oughterson started trading independently. He was a leader of the business community in Cochin and was, in fact, the chairman of the inaugural meeting of the Cochin Chamber of Commerce held on December 28, 1857.

Initially, his business in timber was prosperous with lucrative contracts with the state of Travancore. Ship building was a thriving business in Cochin and the state, reportedly, supplied hulls for frigates. In fact, a portion of the Aspinwall property was reserved for shipbuilding. However,

things went awry when Oughterson failed in his contract with the Travancore state, resulting in lawsuit and losses. He then sold up to the Scott brothers, Archibald and Michael, who were running Ritchie Stewart & Co in Bombay. It is at this point that J.H. Aspinwall first makes his entry. He was taken into partnership by the Scott brothers and put in charge of the Cochin enterprise.

Ritchie Stewart & Co suffered a crash due to speculation in cotton trading during the American Civil War in 1867 and the entire assets of the Scott Brothers firm in Cochin were transferred to the managing partner, Aspinwall. The firm took the name Aspinwall & Co on June 30, 1867. During the early years, the company traded mainly in coconut oil, pepper, timber, spices and gradually coir, coffee, tea and rubber.

Interestingly, Andrew Vance Dunlop Best, the manager Aspinwall instituted in Madras would later marry his daughter, and the Madras and east coast business were given to the young couple as a wedding present. This was later to become Best & Crompton and Aspinwall was to act as agents for Crompton Engineering Co when

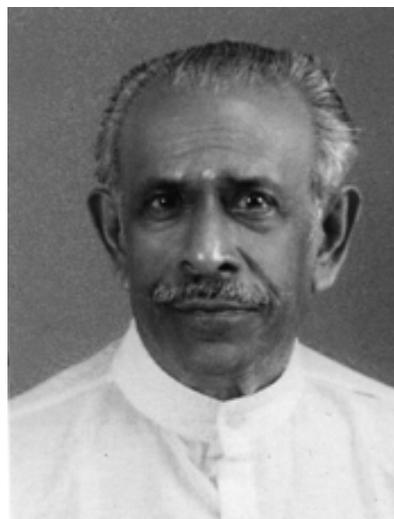
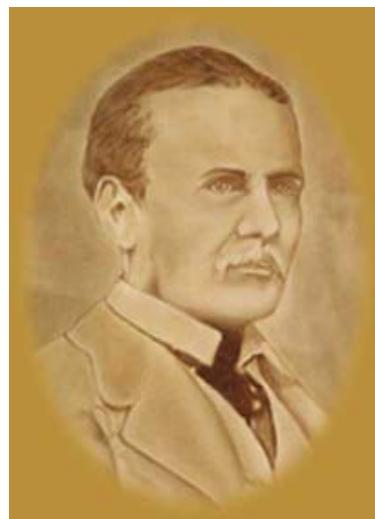
electricity generation was managed by them in British Cochin.

In 1871, Aspinwall formed a partnership in London with Archibald Scott, but in 1874, the firm ran into financial difficulties and a mortgage was made of the Cochin properties to a creditor in London. The debt was finally settled in 1897. In the meantime, W.N. Black, who is considered the real architect of Aspinwall, was made a partner in the firm.

Aspinwall, who travelled frequently between Cochin and London, died in London on September 11, 1884. His death was mourned in Cochin and flags were flown at half mast. He was not only a businessman, but had taken a keen interest in the civic activities of Cochin and served as vice-president of the Fort Cochin Municipality from 1875 to 1878. He was also president of the Cochin Chamber of Commerce in 1870. In his book *Cochin Saga*, Robert Bristow, the engineer of the Cochin Port says that Aspinwall was a strong advocate for the harbour. A commemorative plaque in Fort Cochin's St Francis Church marks his legacy: "John Hutchinson Aspinwall, for many years a merchant of this town and ever a warm promoter of its interests."

After the death of Aspinwall, W.N. Black was joined by E.H. Black in managing the firm. The company suffered a near crisis when a fire, started on sailing crafts moored off the Cochin premises, spread to the warehouses and destroyed stocks. The excellent relationship that the Black brothers had build with the local trading community, however, helped them tide over the crisis.

The Black brothers gradually started moving into the background and E.H.



(Far left) J.H. Aspinwall; (right) Chairman His Highness Marthanda Varma; The old Aspinwall office on the Fort Cochin waterfront



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Extending the Wall

Aspinwall came to a rewarding agreement with British Indian Steam Navigation Co, belonging to the well-known Inchcape Gp, for major steamer agency representation. W.N. Black was a close friend of Lord Inchcape, who offered the agency to Aspinwall and promised that it would not be transferred back during the lifetime of Black even if Inchcape established its own subsidiary in Cochin. Accordingly, the BISN agency was transferred to Madura Company only after Black's death.

Towards the end of the 19th century Aspinwall traded in coir yarn and in 1904 acquired the Cabral Yard property and established the hydraulic baling press for coir yarn in Cochin. The property gets its name from Portuguese navigator Cabral, who made the first shipment of merchandise from Cochin in 1500.

In the early 20th century, the company entered into a contract with the Cochin forest department and the Kolar Gold Mining Company for procurement and supply of timber. The Trichur Saw Mill Company was inaugurated by the Maharaja of Cochin, but the business soon folded up.

With the expansion in business, Aspinwall acquired the leasehold right of an island called Ramanthuruthu, situated in the Cochin backwaters in 1912. Ramanthuruthu derived the name of Candle Island as the company initially used to stock candle manufactured by the Indo-Burmah Petroleum Company for which Aspinwall were the agents. This was the only source of candles in those days.

The Pullicoon Coffee Curing Works at Tellicherry, originally owned by Arbothnot & Co and Alstons Coffee Works was acquired and a small trading office established in Mangalore in 1920. The manager's bungalow, situated on a scenic spot on a hill in Tellicherry, was sold to A.K. Kaderkutty Sahid, a friend of the company. The bungalow, mentioned in historical records, still maintains its old style and grandeur.

Aspinwall pioneered rubber plantations in Periyar and Preekani estates near Alwaye. Since 1936, the company exported rubber and was the purchasing agents for Firestone Tyre and Rubber Company.

Cooper became the manager of the company. Aspinwall attained corporate status with the formation of a limited company in 1910. Apart from the Black brothers, Cooper joined the board and acted as managing director. A.D. Peacock, who was with the company till 1973, served as the last English managing director.

In 1956, Aspinwall changed form from a private limited to a public limited company with the sale of a small part of its shares. The major shares were held by a London based company called Vavasseur & Co. Ltd. The first major sale of Aspinwall shares was to Narayanan Investment Trust (Pvt) Ltd, a company in which the Travancore royal family had interests. The majority shares were acquired by the Travancore royals in 1971.

S.Vaidyanatha Aiyar, private secretary to the Travancore Maharaja acted as chairman of the company from February 1971 to March 1972. Thereafter, Her Highness Maharani Setu Parvathi Bayi became chairman and C.R.R. Varma became managing director in 1979.

While the company's strength is its shipping wing, among others such as coir, rubber and coffee, it has also made its entry into sectors such as tourism and ITES, under its current chief executive N.R. Pai.

Tragedy in Pullangode

"My dearest little wife," wrote Stanley Patrick Eaton, manager at Pullangode Rubber Estate, Nilampur, at 11:45 am on August 22, 1921. "It is a bad show here. They have started this morn to set fire to lots of places." A few minutes after writing to his wife Winifrid, Eaton was killed by a violent mob that chased him from his bungalow at Pullangode. He was one of the thousands of victims of the Malabar Rebellion of 1921.

Over 85 years later, Eaton's last letter came to light. Winifrid's grandson, Al McLeod stumbled upon the letter and a few other documents regarding that tragic incident. "I found the letter in a suitcase of old photographs and letters, through my grandmother's time in India," says Al. Among the documents is a detailed, well-written account, running into five typed pages, by Winifrid of what happened to her husband.

Winifrid writes: "When the unrest started the District commissioner, Mr Thomas, in Calicut advised the handful of rubber planters in Nilambur Valley that it might be advisable to get their wives and families up to Ootacamund in case there were any disturbances. That there was every cause to fear just such a happening was amply justified by the reports of religious unrest coming in from the local police posts all around us."

So, Eaton took his wife and her mother to his friend's tea estate at Devarashola, Nilgris. He returned to Pullangode because he had some urgent business. A few hours after he reached the bungalow at Pullangode, he saw smoke coming up from the direction of the rubber factory in the valley, some hundred feet below. That was when he began to write his letter.

Winifrid writes: "At this, Stanley Pat ordered the boy (chief

servant) and the other servants to make off into the jungle above the bungalow, while he raced down to the apothecary's house, which was a little away from our bungalow. There he gave Raman Nair a short letter for me and helped them to make haste away through several rubber fields up hill towards the jungle, which ringed the estate close to the upper fields....

He forgot that his on estate ranger also a Moplah, had a gun, and it was he —racing up towards the now yelling mob seeking the people from the bungalow— who saw Stanley running toward 'Kerala' and shot him in the hip. By that time the vanguard of the fanatical mob were in sight and they closed in on him as he lay helpless and hacked him to bits." Winifrid came to know of her husband's death only several days later in Ooty through a newspaper report. Raman Nair had later narrated to her the course of events that led to Stanley's death.

Continued from page 1

being treated to curry puffs on special nights and having to wash hands in buckets of water kept outside the dinning halls. Karen went to school in St Hilda's in 'snooty Ooty', and for the holidays came down to Fort Cochin, where her father's sister Bess and husband Jack Kempson Hopkins, chairman and GM of Aspinwall and Co.

Ltd lived. "They might have met and fallen in love on the ship that they came over in," says Karen, who retired as a physiotherapist. The young couple were married at St Francis Church. And since they did not have any children, Karen was like a daughter to them.

Karen and Gerry went through the old marriage register of St Francis and got a fresh copy of



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the marriage certificate made. "We found that it is surprisingly easy to find old records," says Gerry, who worked with Marks & Spencers. "At the church and even at St Hilda's, we just had to provide a date and the old books are there for your perusal." While the records seem easy enough to find, some of the old sites in the photos are proving surprisingly difficult to track. There are pictures of a couple of grand old bungalows in Fort Cochin that have, apparently, been pulled down.

Karen vividly remembers the event that led the family to uproot themselves from Kerala and return to England. When the Communist movement gained strength in the state, there were agitations on the plantations. Karen remembers a mob

chanting and circling the bungalow in which the family lived. "It was a frightening moment and a turning point for my family," she says. "My parents then made the decision to return to England."

Karen's earliest memories of England are of how cold it was and being amazed by the snow. "I remember sitting around coal fires," she says. She feels, however, that life back in Barrow Inverness, where they lived, did not agree with her father. "The lifestyle was different and more stressful in England and he did not know anything other than to be a planter," she says. He died aged 55.

But nearly 50 years, walking down the old streets, visiting the old dorms, classrooms and estates, it has been a "happy homecoming".

IT'S AN OLD STORY

Vasco comes to Cochin

Malabar Collector William Logan's erudite *Malabar Manual*, first published in 1887, contains fascinating details of Vasco da Gama's arrival in Calicut and his meeting with the Zamorin. Here is an abbreviated account taken from the *Manual* of that momentous meeting

Vasco da Gama's fleet consisted of three small vessels called the San Raphael (his own ship, 100 tonnes), the San Gabriel (his brother Paulo da Gama's ship, 120 tonnes) and the San Miguel (commanded by Nicholas Coelho, 50 tonnes). Each ship carried eighty men, officers, seamen and servants. They had intended to hit the Cambay, but a broker provided by the king of Melinde, directed them to Calicut.

Apparently, the crew were told that the first land that they set eyes on in the Malabar coast would be a great mountain, which the local people call Delielly. Logan's *Manual* says, "they call it Mount Dely, because in this mountain, there were so many rats that they never could make a village there". The expedition moved from Mout Dely to Cannanore, which was described as a "large town of thatched houses inside a bay". Finally, they moored at Calicut. According to the *Manual*, the intrigues started even before the foreigners touched foot on land. The Muslims, apparently, had the monopoly of trade in Europe through the the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf, were very jealous of the newcomers and sought to nip their ambitions in the bud. The three figures in authority under the Zamorin; the overseer of the treasury, the king's justice and the chief officer of the place guard; were bribed to obstruct the expedition. When da Gama sent Nicholas Coelho on shore with a message to the Zamorin asking him to sanction trade, the

authorities tried to put him off by making him wait. He had, however, been forewarned by a Castilian who was already settled in Calicut, and da Gama refused to deliver his message to anyone but the king. After some delay, the king gave his sanction on a palm leaf for opening trade, but apparently, "the Portuguese were supplied with nothing in the way of goods but rubbish, and scantily even with that". The foreigners were patient through this, but when the Muslim traders intervened to prevent them from getting even this, da Gama asked for an audience with the Zamorin.

But this would mean taking a hostage to ensure da Gama's safety. By the Castilian's advice, the nephew of the

king's justice was accepted as a hostage. Intrigues were rife, however, and when da Gama made his first attempt to land, he found that the Zamorin was not present in Calicut, but that he would be taken by force and da Gama re-embarked.

When the authorities realised that the Portuguese were playing their cards shrewdly, they arranged the interview. Da Gama appeared at the meeting accompanied by 12 men of "good appearance and well dressed". He himself was "in a long cloak coming down to his feet of tawny-coloured satin, line with smooth brocade, and underneath a short tunic of blue satin, and white buskins, and on his head a cop with lappets of blue velvet, with a

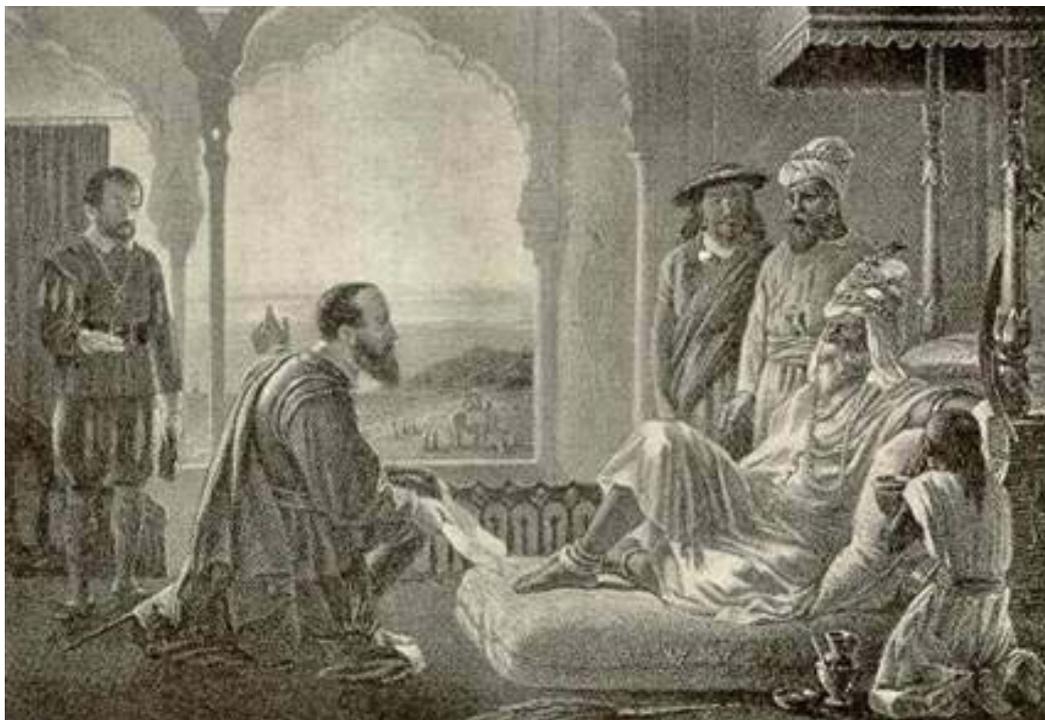
white feather fastenend under a splendid medal and a valuable enamel collar on his shoulders and a rich sash with a handsome dagger".

He must have cut a grand figure, but the Zamorin was not to be outdone. His appearance is described as "a very dark man, half-naked and clothed with white cloths on which were threaded several gold rings with large rubies which made a great show." On his left arm, he wore a bracelet, which was studded with rich jewels, and hanging from it was a diamond of the thickness of a thumb. He wore strings of hazelnut sized pearls around his neck, apart from a thin gold chain, with a pendant in the form of a heart, surrounded with large pearls and full

of rubies and a large emerald. According to the Castilian, all these jewels belongs to the ancient treasury of the kings of Calicut. His long, dark hair was gathered up and tied on top of his head, also decorated with pearls larger than the rest. He wore many gold earrings.

On either side of the Zamorin stood page boys, one who held a jeweled shield and another with a gold cup into which the king, who was handed betel leaves, spat.

Da Gama on meeting the king made "profound salutations". The king responded by bowing his head and body a little, touched the tip of his fingers to da Gama and offered him a seat. Da Gama declined the offer, and during the interview, he pressed for freedom to trade in the produce of the kingdom, explaining what he could give in return.



When da Gama sent Nicholas Coelho on shore with a message to the Zamorin asking him to sanction trade, the authorities tried to put him off by making him wait. He had, however, been forewarned by a Castilian who was already settled in Calicut, and da Gama refused to deliver his message to anyone but the king.

GLIMPSE OF THE PAST

A century through cinema

A Peirce Leslie documentary made in 1962 shows not only the company's growth, but also a Kerala from a very different era

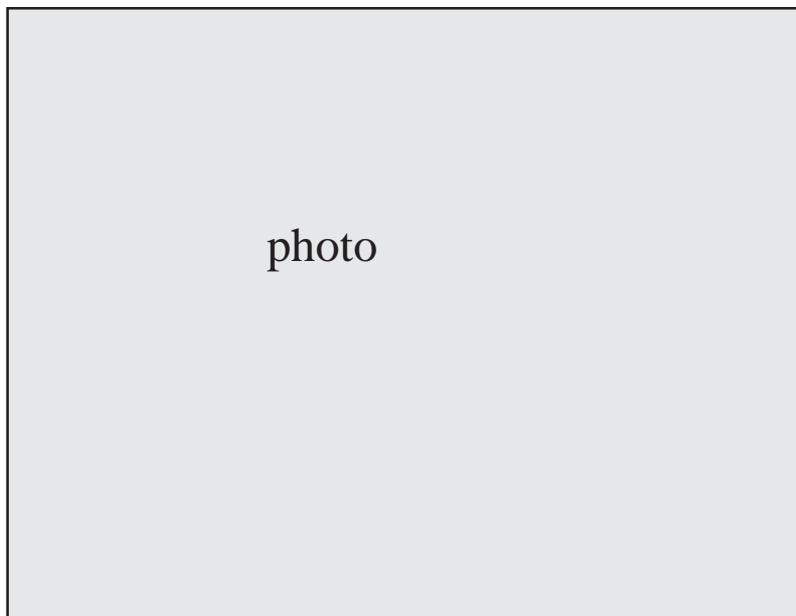
When English trading company Peirce Leslie crossed the hundred-year milestone of trading out of the south coast of India in 1962, it commissioned a film to celebrate the occasion. The result is *Century in Malabar*, a 30-minute documentary on the "history of Peirce Leslie & Co. Ltd; 1862-1962" made by David Bolland, who worked with the company in London and after the war, rejoined them in Calicut. In 1967, he became the last general manager of Peirce Leslie and oversaw its transformation into an Indian public company, becoming its managing director in 1968. He retired to Somerset in 1971.



The film, shot in colour and mostly in Kerala, where the company had its main offices, is interesting not only for the history it traces of the firm, but also for its depiction of very different, almost forgotten lifestyle in the southern Indian state. *Century in Malabar* captures the quieter landscape from the times and books of Takazhi Shivasanka Pillai and O.V. Vijayan. "Even today, the most common form of road transport is the bullock cart and water transport, the *vallom*," according to the film commentary, which gives an insight not only into the evolution of the trading company set up by Robert Hodges Peirce and **Patrick Leslie**, and of

the agricultural wealth and prospects of Kerala, which the company nurtured. Some of the trading figures seem staggering: the company bought 14,000 tonnes of cashew every year and the Mysore factory had 1,500 people employed in cashew processing. There is a quaint charm in the depiction of women working at the factory grading cashew according to its size. They all wear flowers in their neatly-tied hair and multi-coloured glass bangles. There were, apparently, four main items of produce that attracted merchants to Kerala: coffee, pepper, ginger; which had great demand in

western markets and the coconut tree; known locally as the tree of wealth. However, in 1912, apparently, the export of coconut oil stopped. Peirce Leslie & Co. Ltd shipped container-loads of the produce to Europe. The film shows a couple in Germany enjoying a cup of coffee that is "most likely from the company estates". Coir was used as a trellis in the hopp fields in Kent. Hopp is used in the production of beer, "an important commodity in life in Britain". The company was the largest shipper of cashew shell liquid which was used in brake lining "in most of the aircrafts landing at London airport". Apart from these, the company, which ranks among the 12 oldest agencies of Lloyds, also exported, to the west, annatto seeds for colouring cheese, beeswax for polishing furniture, Coulus indicus used in medicine and bone grist for use in fertilizers among other things. The company also pioneered aerial spraying by helicopters in the rubber estates in Kerala. Peirce Leslie & Co. Ltd set up offices and factories in Cochin and Calicut in 1862, and soon expanded to Tellicherry in 1870, Combatore in 1887, Mangalore in 1895, Allepy in 1921 and **Kundara** in 1940. These were followed by offices in Bangalore and Mysore. Of course, there was also a London office. Calicut was the head-office. Dunlop



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was one of the Peirce Leslie agencies till 1920. Each local office seems to have specialised in a particular product. Tellicherry was mainly responsible for coffee curing, cashew nuts were processed in **Kundara and Mysore**. The Allepy factory was known for its high-quality coir matting. Though the company was set up by Peirce and Leslie, it was under P.S. Wilkinson, who was head of the firm for 40 years, that it made its mark. Leslie had returned to London. Peirce stayed on, but died 14 years later in Calicut. His son, HRG Peirce, was tea controller for south India, before he set up Cochin-based Forbes, Ewart and Figgis, one of the biggest tea-auction houses in India.

Some have it and some... fake it!

If you think some the fashions that kids today follow are unpalatable, it would require a strong sense of stoicism to keep a straight face if you were to travel back about a hundred years to take a glimpse of the sartorial sense of the Indian clerical staff who worked in English companies, such as Aspinwall, Peirce Leslie and **Pat Woldstock**.

Quite apart from being a stylistic horror, the amalgam of eastern and western dress-sense that they adopted was not ideal for our humid climes. But apparently, 'clothes maketh a man' and the heat did not matter as long as the Indian babus stood out from the local people. And stood out they must have with their topis that looked like pith helmets.

Senior company clerks wore a monkey cap or turban, and sported *kudumis* (hair tied in a knot).

The style crisis worsens when your eyes travel down to the socks, usually purple in colour, held up with garters and worn with mundu or dhoti. This was tied over a shirt with several gold buttons and a jacket. If the person was well-to-do, he would take it further and carry a large gold watch with a chain, and rubies in their ears. And just in case, this look was not intimidating enough, they carried a walking stick to add to the grandeur.

Local people were not used to wearing stitched clothes, which was perhaps wise in this weather. The clerks, however, who adopted elements of the western attire and worked in offices with no fans, just sweat a lot.

illustration

continued from page 1

"It was quite adventurous building the school from ground up, quite literally," says M.V. Pylee, who retired as vice-chancellor of the university. The institute started with a management school, which came as a recommendation from the Delhi-based All India Council for Technical Education. An expert committee sent by the council suggested that the school be started in Cochin. Pylee, who was a professor of management first at Delhi University and later at Hyderabad's Administrative Staff College, was contacted by the then vice-chancellor of Kerala University, the sole university in the state then, to set up the management school.

President V.V. Giri inaugurated the institute in 1964. "I was told that all facilities would be made available by Fertilisers And Chemicals Trust, which is where classes were held for the first couple of years," says Pylee. The management school started with evening classes, and all the students were working managers nominated by their companies for the two courses — industrial and business management — on offer. It was a good five years before women started applying for the course. "Unlike today, when there is no novelty for bikes and cars, in those days, it was quite funny to see the students cars and bikes parked outside class," says Pylee.

Like the premises, the lecturers were also borrowed and part-time. "People who held high managerial posts were appointed in part-time positions. It was only over the next five years that I appointed eight full-time faculty." Later, 180 acres was acquired for the university in Aluva. Governor Bhagwan Sahai inaugurated the new premises in 1967. Soon, physics, Hindi, law and mathematics departments were set-up. The institution

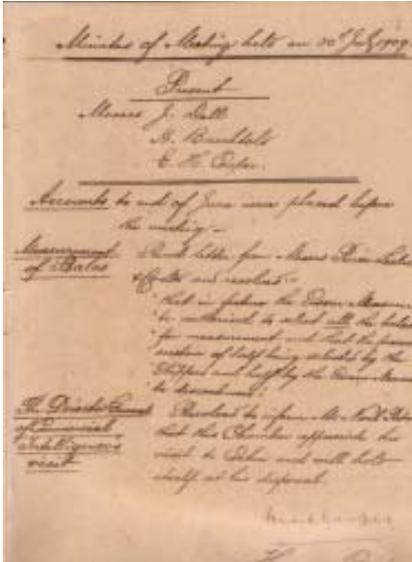


got its university status in 1972. The students applying today are probably unaware of the makeshift beginnings of the prestigious institute. Today, thousands apply for the 30 full-time management seats open every year.

The school has been authorised by the Kerala government to provide consultancy to small scale and public sector enterprises. Its services have been availed by the Department of Industries, the Civil Supplies Corporation and the Planning Board. The school also actively supports research in management and related areas, such as entrepreneurial development, development administration, commerce and functional areas of finance, systems, marketing, human resources and operations management.

A PAGE FROM THE MINUTES BOOK

Minutes from a meeting that proposed to put an 'electric scheme' in motion



Meeting held at 11 am on the 11th March 1919
Present: Messers E.H. Cooper
A. Bueler
H.E. Day
C.H. Hodgson
D.A. Cuthbert
S. Deane
J. Dell

Cochin Electric Scheme: The Chairman reported that Messrs Crompton's representative from Madras would be coming to Cochin shortly to enquire further regarding the scheme they had placed before the Chamber. Mr A.R. Shaw also

informed the meeting that he understood that one of Messers Siemens' people was also expected to be coming here in the same connection. The Honorary Secretary reported that the Dewan of Cochin had informed him on the 23rd, that the Cochin State Hydro Electric Scheme may be expected to be commenced within one year from date. The Honorary Secretary also informed the meeting that he had seen the new installation working at the Tata Oil Mills at

Ernakulam and that Mr Dryden of that Company had told him that a similar power installation sufficient to fans and lights for European houses and offices could be placed in Cochin at a cost of about Rs 35,000. or double the power sufficient for all requirement of Cochin at less than double that cost.

Resolved that Chamber wait until the representatives of Messers Cromptons and Siemens have visited Cochin and thay they be asked to give us full information so that arrangements can be made by which lights and fans would be obtained at the earliest possible moment.

This was followed by a meeting on January 8, 1920

It was proposed by Mr Cole seconded by Mr Jones that the joint scheme for supply of electricity by Messrs Geo Brunton & Sons and Cromptons as oulined in the letter written by Mr Harris to the chairman under date 6th, should be supported by the Chamber.

Meeting of July 21, 1921. The scheme hits a roadblock.

Read letter from Messrs Crompton Engineering Co. Ltd, Madras, regarding the Electric Scheme and intimation that they have now received the necessary license from government. It was decided that the Chamber could not give any definite reply at present until the acquisition of land for a powerhouse had been settled. The matter would, however, be further gone into.