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College celebrates its 90th year

Shukor Rahman

KEDAH'S premier school, Sultan Abdul Hamid College (SAHC), which is the alma mater of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, will be celebrating its 90th anniversary in December.

Apart from an exhibition, a school museum will also be opened as part of the celebrations.

Historian Ismail Salleh said the college can trace its humble beginnings to Dec 8, 1908, when Dr Mahathir's father, the late Mohamad Iskandar, single-handedly started a school with an enrolment of just 30 pupils.

The new school, Government English School (GES), which was the former office of Kedah's Prime Minister Wan Mohamad Saman located near the Balai Nobat, was a one-room building with an attap roof.

Mohamad Iskandar, who had befriended the Regent, Tengku Ibrahim, was the best qualified person for the job as he already had some experience teaching at the Penang Free School.

"The only subjects taught at the GES were English and arithmetic. It was only three months later that three other teachers joined him," said Ismail.

In those days, the Malays were distrustful and highly suspicious of the British. Many were therefore reluctant to send their children for an English education.

Prior to this, there were only Malay schools. Historian G. Mohamad Khan wrote in his History of Kedah that in 1904, the Malay schools at Siputeh, Alor Star, Bohor, Langgar and Kulim taught Malay, and students of all ages studied the Quran.

The Siputeh and Kulim schools were managed by the public. In 1905, schools were opened in Langkawi, Yan and Kepala Batas. In 1907, a Malay superintendent of education was appointed.

Ismail said Wan Ismail Wan Sidek, the Sheikh Al-Islam (a post equivalent to the State mufti), helped to campaign for an increase in the GES enrolment and this soon doubled.

The enrolment comprised Malay, Chinese and Thai boys. Most Malay girls were taught Quran at home.

In an attempt to encourage more teachers, the State Council passed the salary scale for teachers.

Mohamad Khan said that around this period, there were 15 boys' and one girls' school with 21 lay and 14 Quran teachers.

Football was introduced to keep students away from their favourite pastime - gambling by the roadside!

He said the Central Malay School in Alor Star had 164 pupils and four teachers while the Malay Girls' School had 28 pupils and one teacher.

Ismail said Mohamad Iskandar left the GES when Pahang requested his services as it wanted to open a school in Kuala Lipis and he was succeeded by his assistant, Abdul Manaf.

In 1912 the school moved to its second location within the compound of the present police station.

It occupied the house of Ku Baharuddin, the gaoler (a post which is the equivalent of today's prison's director) who had left for Setul (Satun) to become the Raja.

Former Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman studied here before going on to the Penang Free School.

In 1917, the GES moved to Jalan Langgar and the following year the

school was renamed the Sultan Abdul Hamid College.

"During the first 50 years of its existence, the college received a quarter of the State's total education allocation while many other schools had to go without. Some schools had no furniture and pupils had to sit on the floor," said Ismail.

During the war years, the Japanese took over the school and occupied it for nearly four years. When the war ended the college was indeed in an appallingly filthy condition.

The Tunku, who was then superintendent of education, once accompanied Captain P. Whit-worth, the BMA staff officer in charge of education, on an inspection of the premises.

Some local lads had trespassed onto the premises when the Japanese left and had scrawled all sorts of obscenities on the walls.

When Whitworth asked the Tunku what the words meant, the latter answered that they were "very bad words" but he declined to elaborate!

The late J.F. Augustin recalled in his book, *Bygone Kedah*, that when the college reopened on Oct 15, 1945, most of its old pupils and some new ones returned to their classes to make up for the lost years. Several of them, he said, had got married during the Occupation but that was no hindrance to enrolment!

Among the other many distinguished former students included the present Sultan, Tuanku Abdul Halim Muadzam Shah and former Finance Minister Tun Daim Zainuddin.

The college also produced illustrious writers such as Prof Datuk Shanon Ahmad, Prof Tan Sri Ismail Hussain and Kassim Ahmad.

Ismail recalled that the young Dr Mahathir used to cycle to college, played tennis for the college and was active in the debating society. In 1946 he was the editor of the college magazine, *Darulaman*.

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