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Sunday June 19, 2005

Long live Kirkby!

AT LAST, after half a century of waiting, something is being done to perpetuate the Kirkby legacy. It took no less a personage than a member of royalty to do it. On April 28, a lecture hall at the Tuanku Bainun Teacher Training College in Bukit Mertajam was named *Dewan Kirkby*.

The article "The Kirkby name lives on" (*StarEducation*, May 29) has generated great interest and excitement among ex-Kirkbyites.

Two people have offered to disseminate news and views of ex-students of the college via the Internet. Thanks to this modern technology, undreamt of in our time, the Kirkby story can now be accessed through a group website MTTC_kirkby@yahoo.com.

A note of thanks to *The Star* for publishing the article. We can now be in contact with every Kirkbyite in the country, something we have all been wanting to do, and keep the Kirkby spirit alive. *Hidup Kirkby!*

Honours lists



Raja Permaisuri Perak Tuanku Bainun looking at some of the old photos of Kirkby.

To those who have never heard of Kirkby, it was the name of a Malayan teacher training college located 8,000 miles away from Malaysia, in a village near Liverpool, England. It started in 1951 and existed for more than 10 years. The Malayan government sent 150 young men and women there every year to train as teachers. After their two-year course, they came back and were posted to schools all over the country.

Why did the government take this step?

Remember, this was more than 50 years ago. World War Two ended in 1945. The whole world was poor and in turmoil. We were still under British rule.

Schools reopened in 1946. Thousands of children enrolled. There were insufficient trained teachers. Many pre-war teachers returned to work. These teachers taught during weekdays and attended lectures during the weekend. Their lecturers were all British. Together, they form the core of the teaching profession for English medium schools. There were no teacher-training colleges then.

The shortage of teachers was a big problem until some British civil servants in the education service came up with the idea of training teachers in Britain and sending them back here to teach. It was a unique idea for nowhere else in the world did a country acquire a college in a foreign land to train their own nationals as teachers.

So in September 1951, the first batch of students left for Kirkby. A few left by

ship, a journey which took three weeks, but most of us flew by military aeroplanes fitted out with just enough seats for us. SIA and MAS were unheard of then. Meals on board the planes consisted of sandwiches and apples and were served by a soldier in shorts and a singlet. This was my personal experience.

The college itself was nothing to shout about. It would never pass muster to any parent today. But we were young, tough and accepted everything – the weather, food, living conditions, the staff, the curriculum, and best of all, each other!

From the moment we arrived, warmly greeted by seniors, until we parted two years later, there was no time to feel homesick or miserable.

From the principal to the lecturers, kitchen workers, gardeners, sick-bay staff and maids, we were made to feel at home and loved. Most of all, we took care of each other. No parent came to visit but letters and food parcels were aplenty. Everything was shared – misery, happiness, problems, sickness, festivals, birthdays and so on. We bonded, and that bond and love, for all Kirkbyites, will never fade despite the years.

We went out for teaching practice twice a year, working with English children between the ages of five and 12. To the older pupils, we talked about Malaya, its people and culture. The schools we taught in sent rave reports of our teaching, behaviour and character.

We travelled around Britain and everywhere we went, people asked about Malaya and we would show them where it was on a map. We told them about our plural society, with all the languages and religions. We were Malaysia's first "ambassadors".

The reputation of the Malayan teacher training college in Kirkby peaked with a visit in 1953 from the Duchess of Kent .

In 1955, after the *Merdeka* talks in London with Lennox-Boyd, the then Secretary of State for the colonies, Tunku Abdul Rahman Putera Al-Haj, accompanied by Tun Razak, paid a memorable visit to the college.

Now Malaysia has her own teacher-training colleges and Kirkby is no more.

Most of us Kirbyites are in our sixties and seventies – some have even passed on. But the memories, and the Kirkby legacy, remain. We have served our country in the best way we know, during the best years of our lives.

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Via e-mail

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