

## 7

# Brett and Academic Excellence, 1964–1969

*'Learning is its own exceeding great reward'*

William Hazlitt.

*'Atque inter silvas Academi quaerere verum'*<sup>1</sup>

Horace.

IT FELL to Mr. P.M. Brett to steer the school through those difficult years that encompassed U.D.I., the imposition of sanctions and a retreat from the spectacular era of Federation. There would be no further building, no new outward signs of pomp and circumstance — by 1966 the school's numbers had settled at around nine hundred and, for once, there was plenty of room. Mr. Brett, like Colonel Brady, was an Irishman and had obtained his degree at University College, Dublin, and taught in Ireland before coming to Rhodesia in 1949. He was deputy headmaster of Founders High School in 1956–57 and then went to Morgan in Salisbury as headmaster at the beginning of 1958. During 1959 and 1960 he was tutor in history methods to post-graduate students at the University and, at the end of 1960 had been to the U.S.A. for six months on a Fulbright Educational Award; on his return he had been seconded as an inspector of schools for a year before returning to Morgan. He came to Milton with the avowed determination of developing the school's academic standard but his inheritance was not an enviable one: the uncertainty of what might follow the break-up of Federation had deprived Milton of its headmaster and deputy headmaster, twenty-two members of the teaching staff and the bursar at the end of 1963 — they had accepted a "golden handshake", pension, early retirement . . . and the consequent opportunity to do something new. Moreover, the whole educational system was back in the melting-pot again.

In 1959 the secondary schools Examination Council had recommended that the Cambridge School Certificate and Higher School Certificate should be replaced by a qualification similar to the General Certificate of Education recently introduced in Britain, and eventually the Ministry of Education came to an arrangement with the Associated Examining Board with the result that the first Ordinary and Advanced level examinations were written in the Federation a month before it ceased to exist in November 1963. This change involved much greater subject specialisation for Cambridge had offered a group certificate whereas A.E.B.'s was essentially a subject certificate and, as Professor N.D. Atkinson has written:

“It became evident that there must be a more generous provision of well-qualified staff, and a wider availability of subject options, if sixth forms were to be viable units for Advanced level work. And there was also need to provide courses for pupils who did not intend to proceed to specialist courses at university, and who therefore required a more broad-based curriculum than Advanced level courses allowed.”

The problems involved were considered by another one-man commission comparable to that of Fox a quarter of a century earlier and D.G.O. Ayerst, a senior English H.M.I., presented a report to the Federal Ministry of Education towards the end of 1961 in which he concluded that the only real solution was “to find more boys and girls” through the integration of pupils of different races at the upper secondary level. Such a solution was not acceptable to the Federal authorities, particularly at a time when the whole Federal experiment was coming into question, and the government decided instead on a concentration of sixth form facilities at certain schools in the larger urban centres<sup>1</sup> — i.e. Salisbury, Bulawayo, Gwelo and Umtali — and that entrance qualifications based on O level performance would be required. It was at this stage too that successful negotiations with both the Associated Examining Board and the South African Matriculation Board resulted in the creation of a special M level examination at the end of one year of sixth form study to qualify candidates for entrance to South African universities. To quote Professor Atkinson again:

“The adoption of the Ordinary and Advanced level examinations marked one of the most decisive turning-points in the history of the high schools, and indeed of the Southern Rhodesian educational system as a whole. Henceforward the territory was unique

within the central and southern African regions in possessing a structure of full sixth form education, capable of preparing young people for specialist undergraduate courses and other forms of advanced manpower training."

This, then, was the situation when Mr. Brett arrived at Milton — the transition to the more demanding academic A.E.B. examinations with their greater degree of specialisation was under way . . . and Milton had lost close on half its staff, although it was by no means alone in this. The task of actually staffing schools was a daunting one and many teachers came out of retirement to help — one "new" member of staff at Milton at the beginning of 1964 was Jerry Downing — but it was not an easy position. The staffing situation led to banner headlines for Milton in the Chronicle at the end of the year: "FIVE SUBJECTS DROPPED IN G.C.E. AT MILTON" beneath the further heading, "Acute shortage of highly qualified, experienced teachers is blamed". The Regional Director of Education announced that five subjects would not be available to lower sixth pupils at the beginning of 1965, namely Accounts, Economic History, Geology, Zoology and Botany, although the last two would be replaced by Biology. Mr. Pegg, the Regional Director, justified his decision by pointing out that classes were small in these subjects and "the time taken by staff to teach them is not justifiable with such small numbers". He went on to blame "an acute shortage of highly qualified and experienced teachers in scientific subjects and mathematics". The reaction of parents was unhappy and Mr. A.E. Abrahamson, the M.P. for Bulawayo East, said that he intended to make "every effort to right this situation".

The dissatisfaction contributed to the enthusiastic support for an independent sixth form college which would be exclusively used by students desiring an A level qualification for university entrance. The idea was beginning to gain ground that A level would be discontinued in government schools and Bulawayo businessmen and industrialists put up sufficient money to get the project off the ground. The result was a further drain of teaching staff and Milton lost, amongst others, its recently appointed deputy headmaster and the master-in-charge of the sixth form, Mr. Reg Cowper, who went on to become principal of the new college — and subsequently Minister of Defence in the darkest days of the civil war.

Mr. Brett was, in many ways, the man to face such a situation; a Classicist by training, he valued academic excellence above all and,

In 1959 the secondary schools Examination Council had recommended that the Cambridge School Certificate and Higher School Certificate should be replaced by a qualification similar to the General Certificate of Education recently introduced in Britain, and eventually the Ministry of Education came to an arrangement with the Associated Examining Board with the result that the first Ordinary and Advanced level examinations were written in the Federation a month before it ceased to exist in November 1963. This change involved much greater subject specialisation for Cambridge had offered a group certificate whereas A.E.B.'s was essentially a subject certificate and, as Professor N.D. Atkinson has written:

“It became evident that there must be a more generous provision of well-qualified staff, and a wider availability of subject options, if sixth forms were to be viable units for Advanced level work. And there was also need to provide courses for pupils who did not intend to proceed to specialist courses at university, and who therefore required a more broad-based curriculum than Advanced level courses allowed.”

The problems involved were considered by another one-man commission comparable to that of Fox a quarter of a century earlier and D.G.O. Ayerst, a senior English H.M.I., presented a report to the Federal Ministry of Education towards the end of 1961 in which he concluded that the only real solution was “to find more boys and girls” through the integration of pupils of different races at the upper secondary level. Such a solution was not acceptable to the Federal authorities, particularly at a time when the whole Federal experiment was coming into question, and the government decided instead on a concentration of sixth form facilities at certain schools in the larger urban centres<sup>1</sup> — i.e. Salisbury, Bulawayo, Gwelo and Umtali — and that entrance qualifications based on O level performance would be required. It was at this stage too that successful negotiations with both the Associated Examining Board and the South African Matriculation Board resulted in the creation of a special M level examination at the end of one year of sixth form study to qualify candidates for entrance to South African universities. To quote Professor Atkinson again:

“The adoption of the Ordinary and Advanced level examinations marked one of the most decisive turning-points in the history of the high schools, and indeed of the Southern Rhodesian educational system as a whole. Henceforward the territory was unique

within the central and southern African regions in possessing a structure of full sixth form education, capable of preparing young people for specialist undergraduate courses and other forms of advanced manpower training.”

This, then, was the situation when Mr. Brett arrived at Milton — the transition to the more demanding academic A.E.B. examinations with their greater degree of specialisation was under way . . . and Milton had lost close on half its staff, although it was by no means alone in this. The task of actually staffing schools was a daunting one and many teachers came out of retirement to help — one “new” member of staff at Milton at the beginning of 1964 was Jerry Downing — but it was not an easy position. The staffing situation led to banner headlines for Milton in the Chronicle at the end of the year: “FIVE SUBJECTS DROPPED IN G.C.E. AT MILTON” beneath the further heading, “Acute shortage of highly qualified, experienced teachers is blamed”. The Regional Director of Education announced that five subjects would not be available to lower sixth pupils at the beginning of 1965, namely Accounts, Economic History, Geology, Zoology and Botany, although the last two would be replaced by Biology. Mr. Pegg, the Regional Director, justified his decision by pointing out that classes were small in these subjects and “the time taken by staff to teach them is not justifiable with such small numbers”. He went on to blame “an acute shortage of highly qualified and experienced teachers in scientific subjects and mathematics”. The reaction of parents was unhappy and Mr. A.E. Abrahamson, the M.P. for Bulawayo East, said that he intended to make “every effort to right this situation”.

The dissatisfaction contributed to the enthusiastic support for an independent sixth form college which would be exclusively used by students desiring an A level qualification for university entrance. The idea was beginning to gain ground that A level would be discontinued in government schools and Bulawayo businessmen and industrialists put up sufficient money to get the project off the ground. The result was a further drain of teaching staff and Milton lost, amongst others, its recently appointed deputy headmaster and the master-in-charge of the sixth form, Mr. Reg Cowper, who went on to become principal of the new college — and subsequently Minister of Defence in the darkest days of the civil war.

Mr. Brett was, in many ways, the man to face such a situation; a Classicist by training, he valued academic excellence above all and,

whatever the problems, he was determined that Milton's scholastic record should not merely be maintained but should improve. When, six years later, he left to take up the post of Principal at Gwelo Teachers' College, tribute was most perceptively paid him:

"As I think he would himself agree, any valid appreciation of Mr. Brett would have to be cast against the backdrop of his Irish origin. He grew up in a milieu of awakened Irish Roman Catholic nationalism where the hitherto underdog Catholics found their way to position and status by the route of academic achievement. It was a situation which the Irish mentors of the period cleverly exploited to draw the most from their pupils. They set demands of phenomenal industry upon the scholars. They indicated that it was by effort supremely that a man won his way in the world. We saw in Mr. Brett a perfect product of the system. He had an insatiable appetite for work. He was merciless on himself. He disdained fatigue. He would work the whole night through on reports and when most ordinary people were first stirring in their beds he had usually completed half the work of the day. It was not surprising that he was impatient with idleness. He was only really contented when he was busy.

"His whole educational policy was influenced by his own unique upbringing. Scholarship came first. He was at his happiest poring over mark schedules and examination results and could recall the performance in the examination room of countless boys with astonishing accuracy. Academic excellence is what he strove after. His calling was to produce it. When, at the end of his six year term at Milton, the group of boys who had joined the school with him produced some of the best scholarship results in the school's history, it provided for him the finest token of gratitude for his service to the school that could have been devised<sup>3</sup>. The most hallowed spot for him at Milton, I believe, will always be the Beit Hall with its scholarship honours boards. His achievement is engraved there in gold."

Not that the later sixties were lacking in other achievements: in 1965 alone Milton won the Inter-Schools Crusader Shield for water polo after going through the tournament unbeaten, the Mim Du Toit Tennis Trophy (for the first time in fourteen years), the Van der Byl Inter-Schools Judo Trophy, defeated Hamilton in the final of the R.T.V. Inter-High Schools Quiz and took the first prize and the overall group prize in

the senior class at the Young Scientists' Exhibition.

In 1968 Bulawayo celebrated its seventy-fifth anniversary and Milton entered into the programme of events with enthusiasm, its most notable contribution being a large-scale exhibition on the history of Bulawayo and the part the school had played in it. Pictures and essays tracing the city's growth from the arrival of Pioneers to the present day concentrated particularly on sport, industry, housing and the Chronicle, but covered virtually all aspects of development. The exhibition was opened by the Mayor on 14 August and was open for a week in the Beit Hall where it attracted considerable interest.

For the Old Miltonians, too, the sixties were years of achievement: after the end of the war, the Association had gone through a lean period and it was felt that membership would improve if there were a club house and sports grounds. With this in view, ground west of the Parkview Sports Club was bought and levelled but at this stage the Bulawayo Agricultural Society offered their arena for practices and the Kennel Club as headquarters until the present showground club house was completed. This arrangement worked well for some years but was ultimately unsatisfactory in that the O.M.'s could not have unrestricted access to the facilities; accordingly, when there was a chance of a leasehold on an extensive site on Townsend Road, just across Third Street from Milton, the committee decided to take it and vacated the showground premises. The move was somewhat premature as the Association now had no home of its own, no consolidated headquarters, and, although the sporting sections of the club "somehow managed to stick together", there was a real danger of complete disintegration. However, as a result of untiring work by members and committee and particularly the chairman, D.C. Harrison, sufficient funds were raised to enable the first part of a new clubhouse to be built in 1964; the architect himself was an Old Miltonian and the builder the oldest O.M. of them all, that same Les Playford whose name had topped the enrolment register in 1910. Thereafter development went by leaps and bounds and by 1970 there were "rugby and hockey grounds, a cricket oval and practice nets, basketball court, baseball diamond, three bowling greens, four tennis courts and a further two under construction". The clubhouse, too, had been extended and expanded with kitchens, bars, showers and changing-rooms and on 15 August 1970 a new hall was opened by Dr. Verwoerd's widow; it is known as The Memorial Hall and is dedicated to all Miltonians who have given their lives to their country. It was with

justifiable pride that Mr. Harrison wrote, "the Old Miltonians' Club is proving to be one of the most active and successful organisations both on the sporting fields and in the social spheres of the country".

In most respects the Unilateral Declaration of Independence of 11 November 1965 left schools unaffected for some considerable time; they had always been segregated so that the increasingly racial policies of the Rhodesian Front Government had only peripheral impact although new regulations banned virtually any form of contact between schools for different racial groups. Repeated protests by the heads of white schools failed to change this policy and the government's declared intent of providing "separate facilities and amenities for the various (racial) groups to enable them to preserve their customs and way of life" was rigidly enforced. Nevertheless, the editor of the 1969 Miltonian felt able confidently to hymn democracy as an ideal depending "entirely on man's ability to triumph over selfish ambition and strive for better conditions for the whole of society". He went on to stress that this was even more vital in a small community like Milton and ended with a clarion call for action:

"Let us shake off the chains of petty frustrations and unfounded resentment. The school is what matters; and that being so, the effort of everyone is fervently demanded. We must add lustre to our ideals, bring glory to our name, cherish our heritage and look forward positively to a magnificent future so that ex-students will forever look back upon this school with pride and genuine nostalgia."

It was in such a frame of mind that Milton began preparations to celebrate its sixtieth birthday.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>"And seek the truth in the groves of Academus." For so inveterate a classicist, the Latin seemed more appropriate.

<sup>2</sup>Milton's Department of Sixth Form Studies had been conceived and largely completed before this decision was taken although it obviously meant that Milton was admirably fitted to become such a sixth form centre.

<sup>3</sup>The list is indeed impressive:

Beit Scholarship: R. Niven

Anglo-American Scholarship: R. Sandler

Government Scholarships: I. Alers, H. Constable, E. Painting, R. Sandler, M. Riley, S. Chimowitz (St. Peter's/Milton)

Rhodesia Railways Scholarship: K. Duncan

E.C.S. Scholarship: I. Alers

Rhodes Scholarship: P. Jones

In addition 33 boys achieved university entrance from A level, two with five passes (all distinctions), four with four and eighteen with three and nineteen boys obtained eight O level passes.

## **Odds and Ends, 1964–1969**

28 January 1964: Townsend girls joined sixth form classes at Milton for the first time.

15 February 1964: The Milton swimming team won the Harriers Shield at the Matabeleland Inter-Schools Gala. Heavy rain washed out the last twenty events and it was agreed to award the trophy to the school in the lead.

11 April 1964: Les Playford signed the £10,000 contract to build the Old Miltonians club house.

11 June 1964: In the Chronicle the Chiel reported: "Rumour had it that, under the regime of Milton's new headmaster, Mr. Patrick Brett, sport, sacred sport was being curtailed. Rumour had it that parents intended to raise the matter at a parent-teachers' meeting. The subject was raised towards the end of the meeting by the headmaster himself. He assured parents there had been no curtailment of sporting activities at the school. It may be that the children are working just a little harder when in the classroom — and who would quarrel with that? Their individual prospects of making the Springbok team are not impaired."

September 1964: The tennis team toured Natal, winning three matches and losing one.

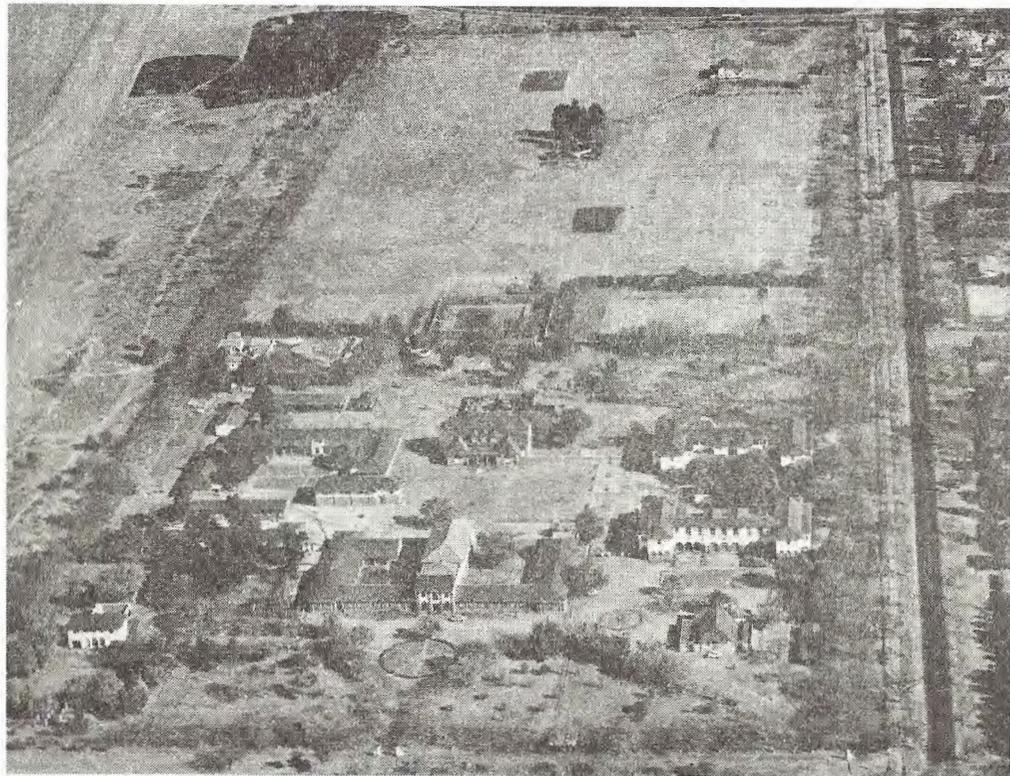
21 September 1964: The table tennis team won the Second Division "with an unbeaten record and a games aggregate that must be a record for this always hard-fought division". In the course of the year they also won every major junior title: Rhodesian Junior, Matabeleland Junior, Mashonaland Junior and Matabeleland Schools Championship.

August 1965: A letter in "Ex Ore Equi", a sixth form newsheet, attacked the privileges of the sixth form girls, complaining that, in their common room, "I am told the girls have extremely nice armchairs,

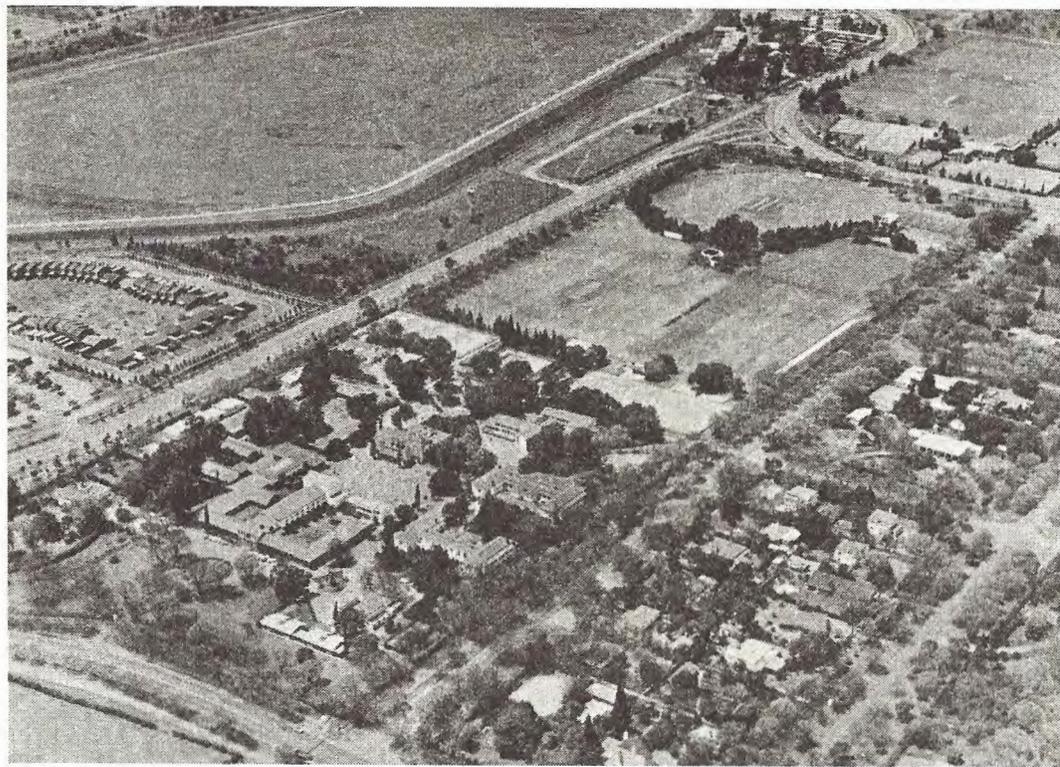
carpets, the lot — whereas our prefects' common room has none of these luxuries". The same issue also attacked the Beatles as "not merely outspoken, but boorish now that they have the world at their feet".

- August–September 1965: The 1st XV toured Western Province, winning one match, losing three and drawing one.
- 6 February 1966: Milton beat Oriel Boys' High in the final of the R.B.C.'s "Top of the Form".
- 14 February 1966: Milton was adopted by the Johannesburg school, Hoerskool J.G. Strydom which offered to send parcels of articles which were scarce in Rhodesia. "The boys reacted instantly with a hearty cheer for the friendly Johannesburg school".
- 12 April 1966: The first night of the annual play, "The Lady's Not For Burning" by Christopher Fry, was a sixth form, evening dress gala with corsages handed to the girls as they arrived.
- 10 September 1966: The head boy, Peter Jones, represented the school at the state funeral of Dr. Verwoerd who had been assassinated four days earlier.
- October 1966: The cricket match versus Plumtree resulted in a tie (the only one in the entire series): Milton 101 and 122, Plumtree 113 and 110.
- 6 April 1967: A member of the upper sixth, Ralph Glover, produced the school play, Anouilh's "Antigone".
- May 1967: A Poetry Society was formed and, as well as encouraging the writing of poetry, it discussed during the year T.S. Eliot, Pasternak, Lawrence Durrell, Ezra Pound, Rimbaud and Dylan Thomas.
- 6–18 May 1967: The 1st XV toured Natal, winning two matches, losing three and drawing one. The team travelled in the two school buses, one of which averaged 50 m.p.h. and the other of which was hard put to manage a 25 m.p.h. average.
- 11 January 1968: The Chronicle reported that an ex-Milton pupil, Leslie Wasserson "has been asked by Britain's Ministry of Technology for a copy of his Master of Science thesis on fluid dynamics, which has been hailed as a highly valuable and original work".
- 21 April 1968: As part of the City's 75th anniversary celebrations, a junior mayor and mayoress were appointed for the first time; the junior mayor was Milton's deputy head boy, George Lambert-Porter.

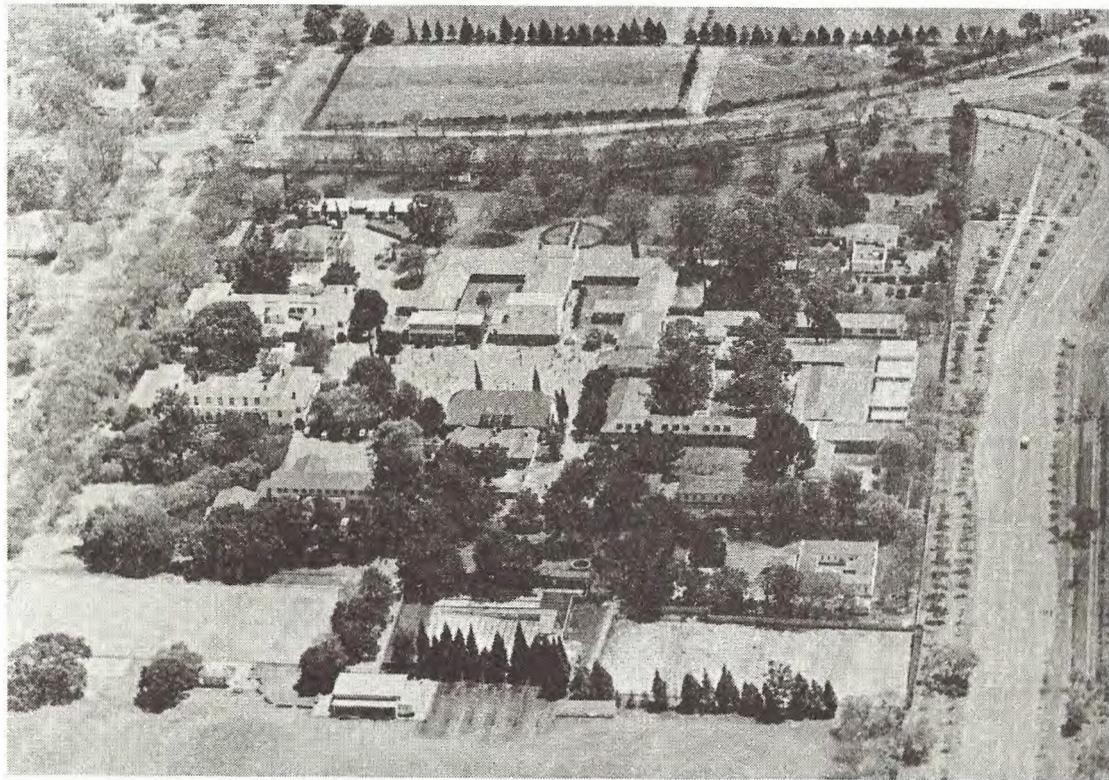
- August 1968: A cookery book, "Milton Moments", was published as a fund-raiser.
- 22 September 1968: The P.E. master, Lionel Reynolds, won the light-heavyweight title at the South African weight-lifting championships in Cape Town.
- Third Term, 1968: A "student of the classics" translated "tempus fugit" as "Tempus has voetsaked".
- 8 February 1969: Air Commodore Archie Wilson, an Old Miltonian, was appointed Air Officer Commanding the Royal Rhodesian Air Force, the first born Rhodesian to hold the position.
- May 1969: The 1st XV toured the Northern Transvaal winning two games and losing one.
- July 1969: The P.T.A. "shelved the matter of safari suits as it was felt the tie, an identification with the school, would be lost".



**Aerial View of Milton from Selborne Avenue, 1958.**



**Aerial View of Milton from Selborne Avenue, 1978.**



**Aerial View of Milton from the Playing Fields, 1978.**



Aerial View of Milton from the Thompson Fields, 1978.