

# *The history and origins of Muir College*

## *Boys' High School*

*In 2022 Muir College will celebrate **200** years since its establishment. Muir College is situated in Kariega (formerly Uitenhage) which is part of the Nelson Mandela Bay Metropolitan area in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa.*

### Brief History

Of the single-sex schools that currently exist, Muir College is the oldest English-speaking boys' school in South Africa. It traces its origin back to 1822, when a Scottish educationist, James Rose Innes, established Uitenhage's first Government Free School in a house probably situated at the bottom of Cuyler Street in October 1822 with 60 pupils, irrespective of gender, ethnicity or class. From the outset the school was a success, not least because Innes offered instruction in both English and Dutch, which proved popular with both the English and Dutch-speaking populace. By 1829 the enrolment had almost trebled. Innes was succeeded by Mr Thomas Thompson in 1830 and he in turn was succeeded by Mr John Gibson in 1840.

In 1865 the Proprietary School – more exclusive and fee-paying - opened. Its founding headmaster was the Rev. Robert Templeton M.A. When he left Uitenhage at the end of 1866 to take up a position in Bedford, he was succeeded by Mr F.H. Brice as headmaster. As an independent school and therefore receiving no financial support from government, the Proprietary School soon ran into difficulties. As it was not on the list of Government Schools, the school was not able to access financial support from the government, but Brice's school managed to survive.

The Education Act of 1865 paved the way for Government Schools, 100% funded by government, to become state-aided schools, as the authorities wanted local communities to share the financial burden of running the schools as well as to have a greater say in the management of their schools.

Many of these lacked the success of the Uitenhage institution. When Mr Gibson retired on 31 December 1872, his school was 'abolished' as a Government School but on 1 January 1873 an amalgamation of the two schools took place and it opened as the Uitenhage Undenominational Public School, (UPS). Mr Brice was appointed principal of the newly amalgamated institution.

The application of the Education Act was based on all Government Free Schools first being legally 'removed' from the Establishment before the new funding model was applied. All Established Government Free Schools were therefore technically 'closed' on the resignation, retirement, death or dismissal of the principal, followed by the re-registration of the school as a state-aided non-denominational (in other words not linked to or administered by any church) public school. This 'closure' therefore mostly did not mean the complete end of a school – rather it was a re-classification process that allowed for the re-opening of a school on a different financial and management model, under a new principal, but often in the same building with the same pupils.

The declining number of girls attending the UPS during the 1870s was reflected in the establishment of private institutions for girls being opened in the town, as well as the establishment of our sister school, Riebeek College for Girls in 1877.

In 1875 the UPS moved to Park Avenue and following the threat of closure on account of financial issues, was revived as a 'First Class Public School for Boys' in July 1888. In 1892 the Public School's name changed to the Muir Academy in honour of the new Superintendent General of Education, Sir Thomas Muir. In 1904 a new school building of red brick, designed by William White-Cooper, was opened on the Park Avenue site by Dr Muir. By now the Muir Academy was being referred to as Muir High School, but by 1907 it was widely known as Muir College.

In 1962 Muir Primary became a separate, independent institution and occupied the Preparatory Block in Cannon Street. Muir College Boys' High School moved to Vanes Estate in 1987 and Muir Primary moved into the Park Avenue buildings. The Senior and Primary schools amalgamated in 1994 and now occupy the Vanes Estate site. Boarding facilities for approximately 100 pupils are also situated on the Vanes Estate campus.

### Origin of the School Badge

The school badge had its origin with the Proprietary School. It shows the Rampant Lion of Scotland in the left quadrant, which honoured Scottish headmaster R. Templeton. Facing it is the Cross from Uitenhage's coat of arms from the family crest of General J. Uitenhage de Mist, after whom the town is named. Below is the Xhosa Warrior, which represents the Eastern Cape. This figure appears on the seal of the proposed Eastern Cape Colony. Although the division of the Cape Colony into East and West did not occur, a seal was prepared and is on view in the Cuyler Manor Museum. The last quadrant shows the Anchor, representing the Colony of the Cape of Good Hope.



### Establishment of the school

For many years Muir College has faced the vexing question about its founding date. The Education Act of 1865 certainly cut right through our history. But we have always considered that our educational activities could be traced back uninterruptedly to 1822. Following extensive research in the Cape Archives by Old Muirite Robert Weatherdon in the late 1980s, and after consulting the Rhodes University History Department and the recently opened Education Museum, Muir College took the bold step in 1989 of re-adopting 1822 as our founding date.

Muir College is supported in this by the extensive research done on the histories of the Cape's early schools by the Centre for Conservation Education and Education Museum in Wynberg, Cape Town. Their information is based on 10 years of more recent research done by Ms Sigi Howes using primary sources such as the Educational Returns contained in the Government Blue Books, Inspection Reports & the Education Gazettes, and also scrutinising how the Education Act of 1865 was applied to schools.

SA History Online also tells us that "In 1839 an Education Department was established at the Cape with a superintendent, James Rose Innes, at its head. Innes was the 22-year-old schoolmaster who established the school in Uitenhage in 1822 that was to become Muir College, named after one of Innes's successors as Cape Superintendent-General of Education, Dr Thomas Muir (later Sir Thomas)".

We therefore have clear evidence that there has been continuity from 1822 to the present day. There have been periodic changes in the status, the name and the location, but in every instance involving only one of these elements e.g. to a new building, or from an entirely free school to a partially fee-paying school. The Education Act of 1865 (Nr 13) was pivotal in laying the foundation for Public Schools, which allowed the Government School under Gibson to develop and grow into the school it is today.

A further act of legislation more than a century later, the provision of 'Model B' status, allowed public (i.e. non-private) schools to determine their own admissions policies as from 1991 – a step that transformed the educational landscape in South Africa – and Muir College was one of the first schools in the country to open its doors to all. This necessitated the technical closure of Muir College as it was in December 1990 and its re-registration as a 'Model B' institution from the beginning of 1991. A similar closure and re-registration took place a year later with the advent of 'Model C' – whereby schools falling under government departments were in effect accorded semi-private status.

In this spirit, Muir College stands by its 1822 foundation date and will proudly celebrate 200 years of good education and of moulding boys into gentlemen.

*Nec pluribus impar*



This document has been compiled and distributed jointly by Muir College Boys' High School and the Old Muirite Union, 2021.

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