

Historic Building Appraisal
Bonham Road Government Primary School
No. 9A Bonham Road, Sai Ying Pun, H.K

The site history of No. 9A Bonham Road can be traced back to a period from 1869 to 1926, when it was occupied by the Diocesan Boys' School before it was moved to Mongkok. In 1883, Dr Sun Yat-sen, known as Sun Tai-tseung (孫帝象) at that time, studied there, but later left and enrolled in the then Central School (中央書院) on Hollywood Road in 1884. A bronze statue of Dr Sun Yat-sen, presented to Bonham Road Government Primary School (BRGPS, 般咸道官立小學) by his granddaughter, Dr Lily Sun (孫穗芳), was erected in 2011. It stands in the garden in front of the main building. In front of it is a fountain, which can be identified in a photo dated 1941. *Historical Interest*

Known as BRGPS from 2000, the existing school premises were originally built in 1940 - 1941 to house the Northcote Training College (羅富國師範學院). The building contract was awarded to Messrs. Cheong Hing & Co. in early 1940. The new building, named after Governor Sir Geoffry Alexander Stafford Northcote (1937 – 1941), was completed in April 1941 and formally opened by him on the 23rd of the same month. The history of the institution dates from 1939, when it was named the Teachers' Training College (香港師資學院) and formally opened on 18 September 1939 as the first full-time teacher training college in Hong Kong, with a two-year full-time course constituted by an English section (24 students) and a Chinese section (24 students), in each of which were enrolled 12 men and 12 women. But it was only temporarily housed in the old converted Superintendent's Quarters of the Government Civil Hospital on Hospital Road. It was renamed Northcote Training College in 1941 when it was moved to its new, purpose-built premises at No. 9A Bonham Road.

The founding of the Teachers' Training College occurred in response to calls for reform of the education system in Hong Kong. In 1935, the *Report on Education in Hong Kong* was compiled by Edmund Burney, His Majesty's Inspector of Schools. The *Burney Report* presented an extensive review on the education system of the colony at the time,¹ with recommendations including the expansion of vernacular education, enhancement of the curriculum in government and grant-in-aid schools (for instance, through expanded provision of liberal education, with subjects such as physical education, music and arts and crafts) and the improvement of teacher training.

¹ Edmund Burney came to Hong Kong to conduct the review, largely as a result of criticisms in Britain of the *Annual Reports of the Director of Education, Hong Kong*, which were taken to show up the deficiencies of relying upon a generalist without specific knowledge and experience of education as Director of Education.

To realise such reforms, it was recommended that “a new Government Normal School, or considerable additions to the present premises, may be necessary”.²

Consequently, in 1938, a thorough review on teacher training in Hong Kong was conducted by a committee appointed by Governor Northcote. It recommended that a full-time training college for teachers be established, so that they could undertake a wider range of academic studies and have more time for both theoretical and practical training in teaching.³ The Teachers’ Training College was thus opened on Hospital Road in September 1939 as the first full-time teacher training college in Hong Kong. It offered a two-year full-time course constituted by an English section (24 students) and a Chinese section (24 students). It was renamed Northcote Training College in 1941 when it was relocated to the Bonham Road campus. The new main building was designed to accommodate 100 students and included a gymnasium, a nature study laboratory, rooms for handicrafts and domestic science, art, music and geography, lecture rooms and rooms for taking and observing practical teaching work. Every practical subject had its own room. The trace of the name “Northcote Training College” could still be identified at the main entrance leading to the central staircase of the main building during site inspection in 2020.⁴

The college was forced to close in December 1941 due to the Japanese invasion. After the fall of Hong Kong, the campus was used by the Japanese Military Police (the *Kempetai*) as their headquarters. People were interrogated in the main building, while horses were stabled in the gymnasium. It was then damaged by looters, who removed all the wood, whether in the form of furniture, partitions or flooring.⁵ The college was re-opened in March 1946. Due to the acute shortage of living accommodation while the total enrolment of the college was only 25 shortly after the war (but in 1947, the number rose to 46, and in 1948, to 125), the students’ common room and the staff common room of the main building were used as a temporary female students’ hostel until 1947, while a men’s hostel was housed in the basement of St. Stephen’s Girls’ College.

² Edmund Burney, “Report on Education in Hong Kong”, *Hong Kong Memory* <https://www.hkmemory.hk/MHK/collections/education/All_Items/PreWarEdu_Prints/201303/t20130311_57316.html>, accessed on 3 January 2020.

³ Full-time teacher training was offered by the Vernacular Normal School for Men (官立男子漢文師範學堂) (for men, 1920 – 1940), the Vernacular Normal School for Women (官立漢文女子師範學堂, 1920 – 1941) and the Taipo Vernacular Normal School (大埔官立漢文師範學堂) (for men, 1926 – 1941), whereas in-service training was also provided by the government at the Evening Institute. The committee recommended the establishment of a college to provide formal and more professional full-time teacher training.

⁴ The Northcote Training College set a tradition for other teacher training colleges to be named after governors. The Grantham College of Education (葛量洪教育學院, 1951) and the Sir Robert Blake College of Education (柏立基教育學院, 1960) were named after Governors Sir Alexander Grantham and Sir Robert Blake respectively.

⁵ It was recounted by the then Principals of the Northcote Training College, namely Mr T.R. Rowell (Principal, 1939 – 1941), Professor S. G. Davis (Lecturer, 1939 – 1950 and Acting Principal, 1950 – 1951) and Dr A. Deans Peggs (Principal, 1963 – 1966) that the campus was used by the Japanese Military Police as their headquarters.

To cope with the increasing demand for school places and teachers due to the rapid population growth after the war, the college was moved to a larger campus on Sassoon Road between March and April 1962. The new campus was formally opened a month later. The Bonham Road campus was then used by the United College (聯合書院) of The Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) until it moved to Shatin in 1971. Following renovation in 1973, the Bonham Road campus was returned to the Northcote College of Education (羅富國教育學院, renamed from the Northcote Training College in October 1967) and served as the college's sub-campus. In 1992, the Education Committee recommended the amalgamation of the Northcote College of Education (1939), Grantham College of Education (葛量洪教育學院, 1951), Sir Robert Black College of Education (柏立基教育學院, 1960), the Hong Kong Technical Teachers' College (香港工商師範學院, 1974) and the Institute of Language in Education (語文教育學院, 1982) in order to create The Hong Kong Institute of Education (HKIEd, 香港教育學院). In April 1994, the HKIEd was formally established by legislation. In October 1997, it was moved to the present campus in Tai Po.⁶ From 25 January 2000, the premises at No. 9A Bonham Road have been home to BRGPS. The school was previously operated at No. 119 High Street, once known as Northcote Training College Primary School (羅富國師範專科學校附屬小學).⁷

The campus comprises the main building and the former caretaker's quarters, with a fountain made of granite in front of the main building. It is bounded by fenced wall running along Eastern Street and round onto Bonham Road, and the masonry wall along Bonham Road. A photo taken from Bonham Road in 1941 shows that the fenced wall was not then continuous as it is today, but a large section of it was protected with metal railings. Pedestrian access was used to be provided by two flights of granite steps, one from Bonham Road at the upper level and the other one from Eastern Street at the lower level. Both still exist but the former is no longer in use now. The trace of the name "Northcote Training College" could still be identified at the main entrance on the south elevation facing Bonham Road, while the name of the present school, "般咸道官立小學" in Chinese and "Bonham Road Government Primary School" in English is on the parapet wall at the roof level. The names indicate that this is the main facade of the building.

*Architectural
Merit*

The architect was William Arthur Cornell (1888 - ?).⁸ He designed the school in collaboration with Thomas Richmond Rowell, who was Principal of the Northcote

⁶ In 2016, HKIEd was retitled "The Education University of Hong Kong" (EdUHK).

⁷ The morning session of the Northcote Training College Primary School (羅富國師範專科學校附屬小學) at No. 119 High Street was renamed Li Sing Primary School (李陸小學) on 25 January 2000 and became a full-time day school. The afternoon session was formally re-opened at No. 9A Bonham Road as another full-time day school named Bonham Road Government Primary School on the same day.

Training College (1939 – 1941).⁹ The main building is a three-storey concrete structure from the ground to roof levels, while there is a basement floor underneath. It has an E-shaped plan, comprising a long centre portion and a wing on each end, which was a common design adopted for schools and colleges in England and the US at that time.¹⁰ The plan is symmetrical, with the main entrance doorway and entrance hall positioned centrally on the ground floor. Another entrance is located centrally on the basement floor. The building's design reveals the influences of Streamline Moderne architecture,¹¹ being characterised by curves and horizontal lines and being functional with minimal ornamentation. The most prominent feature is the central staircase with a curved facade facing Bonham Road and a flagpole positioned centrally at the roof level. Its fenestrations, with windows rising progressively up the stairs, enhances the aesthetics of the building. The sun-shading eaves run along the facades and create horizontality. Besides, there were originally three skylights on the roof, which aimed at maximising the natural light levels inside the Art Room at the northwest corner of the second floor, but they have been blocked nowadays.¹² In front of the main building is a fountain built of granite, which can be identified in a photo dated 1941.

The interiors on each floor are arranged relative to long, south-facing verandahs stretching the entire length of the building, which allows windows to be opened onto the verandahs in order to enhance cross-ventilation of the rooms inside. The central spiral staircase with its terrazzo finishes is a prominent feature. When in use as the Northcote Training College, the west wing was designed to accommodate large spaces, with a combined gymnasium and assembly hall (now only used as an assembly hall) on the ground floor; and a laboratory, handicraft room, domestic science room, and art and music room on the upper floors. The east wing was designed mainly for use as lecture rooms and teaching rooms. A canted bay can be identified at the northeast corner of the building. While the rooms with the canted bay on the ground floor and first floor were used as teaching rooms, the one on the second floor was used as a

⁸ In 1912, Cornell was added to the List of Authorized Architects and joined the Hong Kong branch of Messrs. Palmer and Turner that year. From 1 April 1931 to 31 March 1934, he was a Partner of the firm, and retired from it on 31 March 1934. From then on he practised as an Architect and Surveyor on his own account.

⁹ T. H. Rowell was the first principal of the Northcote Training College (1939 - 1941), and later the Director of Education (1946 – 1951). This was actually the second collaboration between Rowell and Cornell in designing school buildings. Their first school project was the King George V School in 1935 - 1936. At that time Cornell was a retired Partner of Palmer and Turner and was practising on his own account, while Rowell was a teacher at the school. Being anxious to obtain the best available design, the Department of Education sent Rowell to England to report back to it on the most suitable type of building for the new school. At the time, European designers were being heavily influenced by the pure clean lines of modernist architecture.

¹⁰ "The Northcote Training College", *Hong Kong and Far East Builder*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (Hong Kong: The Hong Kong Building Service Ltd., 1941), pp. 29-32.

¹¹ Streamline Moderne, also known as Art Moderne, was a late variation of the Art Deco movement with curves, horizontal lines and a trace of nautical influence. The 1930s was the heyday of the Art Deco style in architecture, and it dominated virtually all design areas in the Western world, from graphic to industrial products, jewellery, furniture, movies and stage sets, and interior and architectural design. On the other hand, vertical and horizontal emphases on external walls were popular in the modernist movement of the 1950s.

¹² The former skylights might be dually used for ventilation.

library. While there have been changes in the use of the rooms, their internal layouts remains largely intact, with minor changes occurring mainly to the ground floor.¹³

Besides, the hardwood floorboards, and the terrazzo finishes at the skirtings, centre staircase, flooring and cement tiles remain intact. Timber doors and windows and steel-framed windows with patterned or plain glass panes, and old-styled ironmongery, are also well maintained. There are ventilation vents in some of the classrooms on the upper floors and in the external walls at the ground floor level. Ceiling mouldings can still be identified in the rooms on the ground and the first floors. In the rooms on the second floor, pitched beams and ceiling mouldings can still be seen above the false ceilings. In the art room on the same floor, apart from the aforesaid pitched beams and ceiling mouldings, also above the false ceiling are the undersides of the blocked skylights made up of timber frames and glass panes. All these serve to retain the historic ambience of the building.

It is worth noting that when built, the main building contained two air-raid shelters in the basement, each of which was provided with an airlock. The government was aware of the need for air-raid precautions in the 1930s. An Air Raid Precautions Subcommittee was set up. Arrangements for the protection of schools, either by evacuation of the pupils or physical protection of the buildings, were prepared in 1939.¹⁴ The air-raid shelters in the Northcote Training College were not used as it was originally planned, but instead were used as storerooms. At present, the shelters are used as a library and an activity room.

The former caretaker's quarters is situated near an entrance gate on Eastern Street and at the back of the Old Mental Hospital. It is a two-storey concrete structure with a modernist design. The rooms are arranged along a verandah on both the ground and the first floors. It is fitted with timber windows and doors, which appear to be original. The water tank has been retained *in-situ*. At present, the building houses the resource room of the school's parent-teacher association (家教會資源室).

Being successively the home of the Northcote Training College, then CUHK's United College, and at present BRGPS, the campus is fondly remembered by the students, alumni and staff members of the respective educational institutions. In the late 1950s, the campus was also a venue for the students and alumni of the Northcote

**Social Value
& Local
Interest**

¹³ For instance, the former women's changing room on the ground floor has been split into a men's lavatory and meter room, while the former No. 2 lecture room on the same floor now houses the conference room and a room for student guidance teachers; on the first floor the former domestic science room is now used as a music room, with a small portion partitioned off to form the server room, while the former handicraft room has been converted into the computer room and the principal's room has moved from this floor to the former men's cloakroom on the ground floor. No significant change to the internal layout has taken place.

¹⁴ Apart from Northcote Training College, there was another school building which provided air-raid shelters within the building, namely the then Northcote Science Building of The University of Hong Kong built at the same time as the Northcote Training College.

Training College to organise a fun-fair and prepare the props for drama performances, in order to raise funds to establish a primary school.¹⁵ A number of archival records and historical photos are available from the Hong Kong Museum of Education at The Education University of Hong Kong. Besides, Open Day of BRGPS is annually organised around November. Between 1869 and 1926, the site was also home to the Diocesan Boys' School and Dr Sun Yat-sen studied there in 1883, which is why it is on the Central and Western Heritage Trail (中西區文物徑) and the Sun Yat-sen Historical Trail (中山史蹟徑). On the other hand, the historic building's aesthetic appeal and importance as a prominent example of Streamline Moderne architecture have long attracted media attention, academic research and publication.

BRGPS has group value with other historical buildings, including the exterior of the Old Mental Hospital (舊精神病院) and Main Building of St. Stephen's Girls' College (聖士提反女子中學主樓) (Declared Monuments), Main Building and Staff Quarters of the Old Lunatic Asylum Chinese Block (舊華人精神病院主樓及職員宿舍, Grade 2), the Old Upper Levels Police Station (舊半山區警署, Grade 3) and No. 35 Bonham Road (般咸道 35 號, Grade 2). **Group Value**

The main building of BRGPS is a prominent example of Streamline Moderne buildings in Hong Kong.¹⁶ Two external staircases for fire escape were added at the intersections of the long centre portion and the east and the west wings on the front facade around 1975.¹⁷ This is the only obvious alteration identified, but it has not detracted the authenticity of the building. The terrazzo finishes, timber doors and timber/ steel-framed windows together with their ironmongery, cement tiles with terrazzo finishes, timber floorboards and the spiral staircase are examples of historic building fabrics and materials which are retained in very good condition. On the other hand, the fountain built of granite serves to enhance the setting of the main building with some elegance, while the design of the former caretaker's quarters is harmonious with the main building. **Rarity, Built Heritage Value & Authenticity**

The main building has been serving educational purposes since it was completed in 1941, from housing the Northcote Training College, United College of The Chinese University of Hong Kong to the present primary school. The Northcote Training

¹⁵ In 1958, a fun-fair was organised on the Bonham Road campus. The construction of the primary school at No. 24 Sheung Heung Road (上鄉道), To Kwa Wan (土瓜灣), commenced in February 1961 and was completed in September of the same year. It was probably first named Northcote Training College Past Students' Association School (羅富國校友會學校) and later renamed Northcote College of Education Past Students' Association School, following the renaming of the college in 1967. The school was closed in 2005.

¹⁶ Completed in 1950, University Lodge, the residence of the Vice-Chancellor of The University of Hong Kong (香港大學校長寓所, Grade 1), is another prominent example of Streamline Moderne buildings in Hong Kong. It was designed by Chau & Lee Architects & Engineering (周李建築工程師事務所), which was established by Chau Iu-Nin (周耀年) and Richard Lee (李禮之) in 1933

¹⁷ Architectural drawings of the fire escape staircases were prepared in September 1974. An aerial photo of 1976, the earliest available one after the photo of 1973, shows the staircases have been built by that time.

College was the first full-time teacher training college in Hong Kong, and the Bonham Road site was its first permanent campus and the earliest one of the kind in Hong Kong. The existing school building is also a rare surviving example of school premises that has served both primary and tertiary education. The air-raid shelters, which have left marks on the Japanese invasion, are of historic interest too, and are quite rare in the existing historic buildings in Hong Kong.

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