

## Athoor Boys Town Annual Report 2015-2016



Paradoxically time doesn't appear to have done the village of Athoor (not ABT) and its environs any favours. Original parts that remain seem wizened and cluttered as the new (or extended) crowd round and its arteries clog with moving and parked vehicles, augmented with vacant plots which either sprout buildings or remain like unhealed scars, their scruffy nudity offending the eye. Some coconut palms and former cropping have yielded to lack of water; thorn bushes and scrub eagerly take over and flourish. The same is to be found in education. The formal State system is preoccupied with attracting children into school, keeping them there and moving them up through the classes by age. Merit and performance matters less than rigged assessments and even exams. This places a huge burden on the Boys Town staff whose task it is to deliver extra-mural support, enabling our boys to realise their full potential and cap a good education with a skill or qualification essential to reliable employment. This has long been a core principle of Joe Homan's vision and success in helping our youngsters to lift themselves out of poverty and change their lives, but how is it working in modern India?

Approaching Boys Town the local landscape appears tired and thirsty; at first sight the familiar buildings seem unchanged and welcoming.

Key catalysts in the process is the team charged with moulding, developing and guiding the boys towards their optimum future. Warden Ramasamy is qualified to Higher Secondary School 12<sup>th</sup> standard (Social Sciences stream) and has been in the job for two years with prior service at other Boys Towns. Assistant Warden, Karuppasamy also has 2 years' service and holds a Diploma in teaching, on paper qualifying him at secondary school level but in practice he'd be confined to primary school. Cook Sumathi has 25 years' service here and Perumal has been in charge of the farming activities for the past year. The PE teacher Sivanraja attends twice monthly for the full weekend but the part-time post of Tuition Teacher is vacant.

Schooling covers secondary school for all boys from 6<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> standards (approximately ages 10 to 15+) and exceptionally, higher secondary school (11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> standards and equivalent to 'A' levels) when academic performance warrants. The public school leaving certificate exams are nationally set at the end of 10<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> standards. Of the 9 boys sitting the 10<sup>th</sup> std exam at the end of the last school year (March 2015), 8 passed, with one failing in one subject but passing on resit. 6 continued into further education or training (apprentices) - 4 into industrial skills training (one of whom later left to migrate with his family) and two to polytechnic. The remaining 3 left and returned home to continue into higher secondary school. Boys Town sets 80% at 10<sup>th</sup> standard as the prerequisite for realistically continuing into higher secondary school, whereas some parents still regard even an indifferent higher secondary school pass as an important milestone.

Last year, prior to June 2105, further 14 dropped out of school for a variety of reasons. Six new boys were homesick, six more rejoined their families to migrate and two returned to their separated mothers in response to court orders. Nine existing apprentices continued into their second or subsequent years - 2 in skills training and, one in polytechnic bringing the current total of apprentices to 18. Currently about 55% take courses in industrial skills with the remainder in polytechnic diploma courses.

Exam results can provide useful indicators, not only to child performance but equally importantly to school and extra mural performance in Boys Town. Even though only one boy initially failed 10<sup>th</sup> standard, all boys' results pinpoint the subjects that held them back and which would have a knock-on effect in gaining admittance to higher or further education and vocational/skills training, impacting not only on courses available but also preferential admittance or terms. Warden cites Maths and English as the weakest subjects.

Vocational Guidance assists boys and parents in the transition from school to a suitable career, twice in the year on Parents' Days. Measures are in place to ensure all parents or guardians are aware of intentions for their boy. Any not

attending on Parent's Day are advised to see the Vocational Guidance Officer at Boys Town Headquarters, who follows up to ensure compliance. Boys who sit the 10<sup>th</sup> standard exams then have an exposure or "Trade" visit when typically they visit some appropriate workplaces and training institutes or colleges.

The current school year started June 2015 with 33 boys continuing from last year, another 6 transferring in from children's villages and 2 from other Boys Towns, plus an intake of 2 junior new boys. Two boys subsequently left, one owing to homesickness and another returning home because his mother died. This year's total, 41 is considerably down on last year's 56 and well short of the maximum of 70 now permitted here by government regulatory bodies. On the books of this Boys Town are 4 additional boys in donated places at a private school at Theni.

Athoor Boys Town uses two schools, both in Athoor village. In previous years this involved a 3km walk, laden with school books; now the bus service has improved so the school run is by bus, with free passes. Previously all boys in the lower standards attended a privately run Middle School, but had to transfer at 9<sup>th</sup> standard to the only high school, which is Government run. Warden rates the Middle school as still the best and Government School as only average; neither makes provisions for computer skills or spoken English. He visits both twice monthly, discussing performance and behaviour; there are no problems. Our boys take part in school activities and frequently win prizes in sports and contests.



**Leaving to school.**

Sacred Heart RC Middle School, Athoor is a privately run fee paying co-educational school following the same curriculum as government schools. The first five standards form its primary school while standards six to eight comprise lower secondary. Total strength is 469 with 21 teachers. 15 of our boys are placed in 6<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> stds. These teachers have valuable insight into on-going performance problems. Headmistress and her Assistant cite English and Maths as the hardest subjects. Special coaching classes are held prior to exams. The possibility of running a camp concentrating on spoken English during the summer holidays was mentioned.

Our boys are well behaved but come from poor Tamil-speaking families (ie deprived and educationally lacking). A few don't study well and, some overstay their leaves, resulting in lost school time. Possible solutions might be delaying their departure home to make up the time and spending it on intensive coaching. The teachers insist our boys need more coaching; they should have individual attention in each of their weak subjects and all need more time for private study and set homework. Coaching in spoken English is very important too. While the Head and her Assistant were very open and cordial as in previous years.

Government Higher Secondary School, Athoor is also coeducational with strength of 280 (down from 312) 6<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> std. 160 are in High School and 120 in higher secondary school with four streams – Biology/Maths, Computer/Science, pure science and, Arts. Pass rates at key national exams are 92% at 10<sup>th</sup> standard and 61% at 12<sup>th</sup>. An English-medium stream due to commence with 6<sup>th</sup> standard in June '15, is still dormant. English and Maths are cited as weakest subjects and every morning 08.45 to 09.20, before the formal timetable begins general study classes are held with teachers available to give help. There's more coaching before public exams. While syllabus English has one 40 minute lesson daily, Spoken English has one hour weekly; computer lessons only apply to higher secondary school.

Headmaster is very complimentary about Boys Town boys, overall they are better students than village boys, their homework is good and they are better behaved. Under the policy of Continuous Comprehensive Assessment (also widely known as "All pass – none fails"), students move up through the school by age, not by merit, yet the internal assessment always supports the move. He admitted that teaching concentrates on the least and simplest proportion of the syllabus needed to ensure a 'pass' assessment. He agreed English and Maths were the weakest subjects but stopped short of offering much in the way of positive advice on what Boys Town could do to help boys improve their performance, beyond more, individual coaching. Yet again he admitted that some 40% of the 6<sup>th</sup> standard intake is below the required level and can take up to 8<sup>th</sup> std to rectify.

The English teacher was very enthusiastic and has much to contribute. "Play way" makes learning more enjoyable, while setting a time to speak nothing but English encourages students to exercise what they learn. She cited programmes available in spoken English. Using DVDs is helpful if educational, ie. gives enough time to absorb the images, spelling and sound – soundtracks on films are often too fast to help in the early stages. It's to be hoped that Warden taps into her advice on his regular visits to the school.

Back home in Boys Town the part-time Tuition Teacher post sits vacant and all rests on the Warden and Assistant Warden. The evening programme sets aside one hour (6:30 to 7:30) for private study – reading and learning when



they are freshest (can “study well”). After dinner all boys have a further hour (8:15 to 9:15) for supervised homework. Boys are grouped according to their school standard. Staff give special care to those weak in any subjects and, for the lower standards extra attention to numbers and alphabets (in Tamil and English). Boys preparing for 10<sup>th</sup> standard exams additionally have an hour of private study from 5am. Warden was urged to seek ideas from teachers about ways in which our boys can best be helped extramurally.

Every Saturday all standards together attend a Spoken English session at which an educational DVD is played and all 41 boys practice English, monitored by the staff. English words with their translation are regularly listed on the notice board to be learnt. A small collection of CDs and DVDs for English tuition is held in the office.



**Learning Computer**

Two computers are used by the boys, plus the on-line computer in the office, which 9<sup>th</sup> & 10<sup>th</sup> std boys may browse to find answers to problems on line. Assistant Warden trains in Microsoft Office and a Painting software, in two groups for one hour over the weekend. An Athoor boy came 2<sup>nd</sup> in the Boys Town computer contest at Pongal.

Popular games are football, volley ball and kabaddi. Athoor were both overall and cricket champions at the recent Pongal celebrations.

Indoor activities include board games like chess and carom and, table tennis. The Parliamentary system involves all boys in a monthly meeting, encouraging participation and consultation and, providing motivation and guidance. The Chief Minister, Speaker and eight Ministers play active roles in the daily running of their Boys Town. Parliament voted that all parents should attend Parents' Days (and only four defaulted). An annual medical check-up (and one at school) found no problems, beyond headaches and no accidents or illnesses occurred during the year. Vitamins are distributed twice weekly and vermifuge tablets twice yearly. They participated in a health programme focused on a clean environment and at school level took first prizes for Speaking, Essay Writing and Cultural Dancing.

20 boys went bird watching for the weekend at the BTS Perumparai Environmental Centre in the hills and all had a day's picnic monthly, to Dindigul visiting the Rock Fort high above the town, the Mariammal Temple and a pleasure park, Polachi to the Temple and Dam, Vaigai Dam and, to Madurai visiting the Meenakshi temple, airport and Gandhi Museum. Trade visits for 10<sup>th</sup> standard will take place at the end of term, after final exams. Four scouts joined a two day camp near Dindigul and all boys attended a BTS Skills Development camp at Pannaikadu Boys Town which included hand writing and Life skills. Government agencies and regulatory bodies (Child Welfare Committee and District Child Protection Unit) thankfully remain in the background and it's six months since a visit, while the “Home Committee” met last year. Overall permitted capacity stands at 70 and while four CCTV cameras have been installed, the new fence remains only a threat. During the year local donations provided two special meals for the boys.

The overall site combines residential facilities for permanent staff and boys, with cropped land and a small dairy herd. Boys' rooms are reduced this year from six to four plus accommodation for Warden, Assistant Warden, Cook, Farm Supervisor and a Guest Room. Communal areas include Office, Computer Room, Library, Auditorium, Sick room, Table Tennis room and Sports equipment store, Kitchen and store. Cooking is by firewood and bottled gas. One of two bore-holes is operational and providing adequate water, the old irrigation well is dry. A stand-by generator covers against power cuts as the residential site is too large for an inverter (UPS) and solar power trials elsewhere have concluded that technical back up is too unreliable and costly. Two mature dairy cows, two growing heifers and a day-old calf occupy a permanent byre and are either tethered out for grazing or fodder is carried in; two pet goats are tethered out to graze and seven free-lance chickens roam happily. The cows earn some Rs 10,000 monthly and cost Rs 9,000 yearly for bought-in feed. Coconut palms are grown commercially bringing in some Rs 60,000 annually. Tomatoes, okra and aubergine are grown for kitchen use. The boys help with the work, for example cleaning out and tending their vegetables.



**At Library.**

Following a Parents' Day three days earlier, the site looked well swept and trimmed. Heavy structural work from last year is completed (replacement of one long wall of the Auditorium and one long wall of a bungalow (now the library)). The showers are now screened from public gaze. One large multi-use building, previously housing the library and table tennis room, is now completely derelict and partially roofless. Elsewhere redecoration is in hand and work

earmarked for masons. Particularly needing repair are one end wall of the 'new' table tennis room and the toilet block. The original byre is ageing fast and part of the roof has lost its tiles and some of its timber.

This Boys Town is said by the Warden to be well regarded by the local community. He assesses its strength as being a good place for the boys and they are doing well, "happy students and happy staff." Easier access to schools owing to a better bus service has reversed a previously serious weakness and has to be a plus. Declining occupancy and rapidly ageing infrastructure must surely throw emphasis on economic viability. Academic viability isn't just threatened, it's clearly in decline, with the only available High School acknowledged to be 'average' and probably placing more load on the already strained and reduced in-house coaching and tuition resources.

Most of the boys have a living parent and are able to go home for a while during the summer maintaining the family link and reminding them of how much better their circumstances are at ABT. The principles of whole-boy development and achieving full educational potential, as first laid down by Joe Homan, have been refined over the years, adapting to need, change and opportunity. As exponential change reshapes 21<sup>st</sup> century India, the need sadly is undiminished but here and with the help of our partner schools the means continue and the lucky few realise the opportunity to change their lives – thanks entirely to their sponsors. Seeing where our boys study and meeting their teachers is revealing and hopefully will augur well for numbers in higher and further education for the future. It's what our youngsters and their families want, what their sponsors expect and what India needs; given the will to surmount the challenge, Boys Town can deliver the goods.

Terry Quadling, Volunteer

March 2016

Many youngsters supported by JHC are seeking sponsorship; you may have a relative or friend who might help these youngsters?

We need volunteers who might help these children and others in projects JHC supports with their education and spoken English, do you know anyone who might be interested?

Want to read news from JHC and India? Then why not follow us at [www.facebook.com/JoeHomanCharity](https://www.facebook.com/JoeHomanCharity) or [www.joehoman.org.uk](http://www.joehoman.org.uk). We need friends to spread the news of our work with needy children.

To write to your sponsored child, please use the following postal address, or email via the charity website.

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