

A Letter from India

contributed by Peter Burville

This is a transcript of a letter passed on to me, as the Old Pharosians' Society Archivist, by John H Turnpenny Esq. of Dover. The letter was sent to his mother Miss Lily Valentine Vass by Geoffrey Coombs.

As ex-pupils of the Dover County School they are both Old Pharosians. That is 'old boys' of what is now the Dover Grammar School for Boys. Lily was at the School from 1905 to 1912 and was awarded a BA degree by Bedford College, London University, in 1915. Geoffrey was at the School from 1908 to 1912. After nearly six years war service, in the East, Geoffrey was discharged during 1918 from the Indian Army as a 2nd Lieutenant. In 1923 he was awarded a BA degree by Liverpool University.

The Pharos, referred to on page 2 of the letter, was the School magazine which was

published for many decades, but sadly no longer. The 'cheels' referred to on page 4, are the birds of prey also called pariah kites. Mr. Tomlinson (page 6) was a mathematics teacher at the School. HMS Natal (page 6) suffered a magazine explosion on Hogmanay 1915 in the Cromarty Firth and over 300 lives were lost. According to the January 1998 recollections of Mrs. Turnpenny, 'The Well' (see page 8) was a 1st floor classroom, in the Ladywell building, referred to as such because one stepped down into it.

The letter is written on headed paper of the 1-4th The Buffs (E. K. R.). The original was offered to the Buffs Museum but they did not respond. A copy is lodged in the Old Pharosians' archives, whilst the original has been deposited in the East

Kent Archive Centre at Whitfield.

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L/cpl G. Coombs

No 2275

"D" Company

1- 4th The Buffs (E. K. R.).

Bareilly

India 21/3/1916

Dear Lily,

It is a matter of considerable difficulty to sit down after so many months to pen a missive to you. It is not the lack of news or items of interest which make this difficulty but rather the method of procedure. You told me when last I saw you in Dover that I was to write to you occasionally, but I often think that you have forgotten my existence and will resent me writing in the familiar tone which the commencement of this letter seems to indicate. What makes me think this so likely to be the case is that I have already written to you, just twelve months ago. I wonder if you ever received that letter. I should like first of all to offer my congratulations on the success you obtained

in your B. A. examination. You see your fame has spread even

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to this out-of-the-way spot. A friend sent me a copy of the *Pharos* wherein I read of your success. Of necessity this letter must be mainly of myself and my doings and what little I have to say may be of interest to you but if not, it will come in the way of a diversion after your labours.

After an uneventful voyage we arrived at Mhow on December 4th 1914. How long ago that seems. Here we stayed 8 months. As soon as the novelty of the strange people & scenes had worn away, we became wholly miserable, partly perhaps due to home sickness but mainly due to the restrictions and hard conditions of garrison duty. All my pre-formed notions of the mystic East were soon dispelled when I saw the filth of the bazars, the indescribable squalor among the native habitations, the filthy

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habits of the people, the servitude of the women and the general stench which seems to attach to all the natives and their ways. Mhow is a second class hill station in the Indore state. It is situated about two thousand feet above sea level & for miles around the volcanic nature of the earth is so prevalent that only here & there is the ground cultivated & planted with wheat & cotton, a very pretty water fall with the musical name of Patel Pani (Falling water), is the only place of interest worth visiting. I did visit the ancient, uninhabited city of Mandu, where stands one of the finest examples of Afghan architecture extant in India. Paths have been cut through the jungle to all the buildings. At the end of July we left India for active service at Aden. I cannot tell you much of the operations there as our letters are still partially censored.

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We went into action on two occasions only, sustaining a few casualties, but as the General said we fought in a waterless desert under the most trying conditions found in any part of the globe. We marched in places up to our knees in sand with the temperature over 120° in the shade. There was no growth of any kind bar shrub and I marvel to this day how I arrived back in the trenches alive after walking more than 20 miles with practically no rest. On the second occasion we were shelled for over 7 hours while lying in the open desert. We did garrison work in Aden as well. Aden itself is easily described being the result of a volcanic eruption. The rocks rise to a highest point of 1900 feet, and are absolutely destitute (sic) of anything but the scantiest vestige of vegetation. Only sea birds and cheels

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dominate the air. The sea surrounds Aden on three sides and provides employment for hundreds of fishermen. Sharks infest the waters so that very little bathing can be indulged in. Conditions were such that we spent on the average three nights a week lying on the hard rock or sand. Those of us who were in the trenches were better off as we could sleep most nights on native beds (charpoys) to the rear of the entrenchments. After this you can guess we were glad when we heard we were going to India for a rest. So here we are again. Basically reminds me of Waldershire Park. English

flowers grow in the Gardens and these, together with Indian flora, remind me of Old England more than anything I have met. The white population here is not large but very distant to a Tommy.

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I have only spoken to two white ladies since I left England. Doubtless by now you are fed up with the "I", "I", "I" of this missive. I should very much like to hear from you & learn of your doings, past and future, I have written to Mr. Tomlinson months ago & have had no reply. I begin to think that I have done something wrong. I suppose I ought to have been killed or seriously injured by now & that may be the cause of the trouble. On January 1st of this year my brother lost his life on the occasion of the destruction of the 'Natal' by "internal explosion" while in harbour. I have another brother at sea besides my Dad. If you look upon the map you will find that Bareilly is in the United Provinces, some few miles to

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the east of Delhi. The heat is very oppressive here in the summer which necessitates the sick going to the Hill station, Raniklet. So far I have enjoyed the best of health and am one of the few men in the battalion who has escaped infection. Malaria is a very common fever & few have missed catching it. I hope shortly to go away on leave and shall of course visit the Taj Mahal at Agra & the historic sights of Lucknow, Cawnpore & Delhi. There were no British Troops in Bareilly when the mutiny broke out. The native troops revolted & murdered many of the Europeans residing here. The Church contains interesting memorials to many of the fallen. It is no use bemoaning one's fate but at times we do get heartily fed up with life. After parade hours we have nothing to do & no where to go. We have to

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make our own amusements & the hours between nightfall & "lights out" are the most miserable of all. I do not believe we shall go home before the end of the war and we pray with thousands of others that the end may be soon. I do not think I shall ever settle down to the hum-drum of the life I led before the war. The old manner of things does not appeal to me at all. I hope you get this letter but even as I write I feel that this missive may go astray as the last did. I have heard from W. G. Stuart Morris. You remember him of course. He has been in France many months, & when last I heard was at Boulogne. I often think of the old days in The Well and wish I were sitting with you. I whiling away the time looking at the pictures, you swotting at - all sorts of things.

Yours Very Sincerely

Geoffrey Coombs