

# The Battle of St. Thomas's Hill: 1964-5

## Words by Howard Bennett

Interview by Juliet Thomas: Assistant Director of Estates

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In March 1964 out of the blue Howard Bennett, who had previously been in the Royal Engineers (National Service), was posted to Canterbury by his employer; building contractor Gilbert-Ash Limited, to lead as Contract Manager to build a new University; the University of Kent.

Howard, who is now in his ninetieth year, has clear memories of the immense effort taken by all those involved in the design and build of the University in order to get the works completed in time for the new students.

At the time Howard recalls, on his arrival only the preliminary works were underway. This involved forming an access road from Whitstable Road, and diverting the old Giles Lane; the rest of the site was green fields, and the first students were due to arrive in just 18 months. As Howard described it "Time was the Enemy" and the pressure to complete on time and within budget was intense.

The rapid university expansion plans of the Government in the early 60's meant that, unusually, normal procurement procedures were precluded and a short cut was taken to nominate Gilbert-Ash Limited as the builder; with the contract being negotiated based on a schedule of rates, a specification and outline drawings. Detailed design and construction took place at the same time. As the Architect Lord Holford had only a small team, much of the drawing work was sent out to other practices.

To work at the intensity required to achieve the deadline, close cooperation was vital, so a joint administration site office was set up for the contractor, architect, engineer, and quantity surveyor. Beverly Farm was also adapted to provide temporary office accommodation for University staff. Howard recalled that the Site Meetings could be "quite fierce at times" but at the end of the day they would all relax at the Old Beverlie Pub. This close working network ensured easy communication and an excellent relationship was achieved between all parties.

Recruitment of the large labour force could have been a problem but fortunately ample resources were found locally including specialist subcontractors and manpower of about 450 in all. The foundations of Eliot College were soon under way and were inspected during a surprise visit by the new Chancellor, Princess Marina, Duchess of Kent. She arrived by helicopter outside the Site Office where a "comfort room" had to be created for her in case of need.

The first set back encountered by Howard and his team was when they found that, despite being on top of a hill, the water table was much higher than expected resulting in extra work in the piling procedure. Wetter conditions also necessitated the provision of more temporary roads for cranes and heavy components.

At the same time the builders discovered that the tunnel for the old Crab & Winkle railway line passed across the site, right under Rutherford, which had to be taken into account and Howard recalls how fascinated they were to learn that this was the first passenger railway in the world built in 1830, and that it ran between Canterbury and Whitstable. Howard was equally surprised to hear of its collapse beneath Cornwallis in the 1970's, as this news hadn't reached him.

Work continued apace and in June 1965 a Topping Out ceremony took place when Lt. General Sir Brian Horrocks, a Director of Gilbert-Ash Limited, accompanied the Vice Chancellor who laid the last brick on the roof of Eliot. Celebrations concluded with the customary "free beer for the boys" in the refectory, known today as Rutherford Dining Hall.

In Howard's words "Thanks to good luck, kind weather, and a brilliant workforce" the team hit the completion date and "the battle was won".

Howard recalls that the best moment of the project was completing on time and proudly watching the first students arrive on schedule, on 11<sup>th</sup> October 1965. "It was a great memory for me but I have to admit that there was a certain lack of occasion in the spectacle". Howard felt that a celebratory ribbon should have been cut as students walked through the doors of the first College.

Once Keynes College had been completed Howard reluctantly had to disband the construction team as Gilbert-Ash Limited didn't win the contract for Phase 2 building works. Howard, his wife Margaret and family subsequently moved away from Kent and he relocated his work and family to Hampshire where he and Margaret live overlooking the Solent where he was also an enthusiastic sailor until quite recently.

Howard has seen changes in the construction industry over the years. Previously builders had been family businesses with a paternalistic attitude but many have taken and developed into large National companies with a more impersonal corporate approach to managing staff.