

BACSA's support for the cemetery of St. Stephen's Church, Ootacamund, South India.

During 2009 BACSA donated £250 towards the maintenance of the cemetery of St. Stephen's Church, in Ootacamund (Ooty) in the Nilgiris, South India. It was given in two tranches of £125 through the kind offices of Bridget Pickford, who lives in Wellington, in the Nilgiris, which is not far away from Ooty. The first tranche was given in January 2009 to clear the weeds and the undergrowth. After an inspection by Bridget in April 2009 to confirm that the work had been carried out satisfactorily, the second tranche was provided with a recommendation to the Pastor that it should be used for a heavy application of weed-killer to prevent the weeds and undergrowth from coming back. Bridget sent BACSA some photographs to show how well the work in the cemetery had been done and these were put on show for members to see at the meeting on 28th October 2009.

When I visited Ooty in November 2009 it was therefore a great disappointment to see that the weeds and undergrowth had once again taken hold, as is apparent in the photograph, and there was little evidence of the clearance earlier in the year. The reason for this was that whereas we in BACSA had expected that once the ground had been cleared it would be properly maintained by the church, it was evident that absolutely nothing further had been done after the funds provided by BACSA had been used. Indeed Rev. Jerome, who is the Pastor of St. Stephen's confirmed that this had been the case.



In order properly to understand the situation some background, which I regret that I had not fully understood before recommending that BACSA provide funds, is required.

The Anglican Diocese of Madras (established in 1835) along with other dioceses in the Madras Presidency became part of the Church of South India (the C.S.I.) when it was inaugurated in 1947. All the English Chaplaincies like St. Stephen's and other native Anglican missionary churches plus other denominations like the Methodists, Presbyterians and the Congregationalists came together within the C.S.I.

In Ootacamund today, the C.S.I. is made up of the Anglicans, Presbyterians, Congregationalists and the Wesleyan Methodists i.e the non-evangelical, non-Roman Catholic Christians. The Baptists, Pentecostals, Plymouth Brethren and the Union Church in Ooty are not included in the C.S.I.

There are now three main C.S.I. churches in Ooty. One is St. Stephen's, which is an icon. It was built in 1829 and was one of the earliest buildings in Ooty. The two others are Holy Trinity, earlier known generally as the Native Church, which dates from the 1850s and is adjacent to St. Stephen's, and St. Thomas', which is down by the lake and was built in 1869. Both Holy Trinity and St. Thomas' came under and

were run by the Church Missionary Society and were “low” rather than “high” church.

As regards St. Stephen’s, the structure of the building, its interior and the drive and flower beds in front are cared for by the church itself, which employs two people for this purpose; but the cemetery, which is behind the church, is cared for by a Cemeteries Committee of Ootacamund residents and church goers which also has responsibility for the graveyard of St. Thomas’. Whereas there have been no burials in St. Stephen’s since the 1880s, when it was closed as there was no more space for graves, the graveyard at St. Thomas’ is vast, and is in current use. St. Thomas’ employs one man full time as grave-digger and to care for the graveyard.

When I asked Rev. Jerome why the cemetery had not been maintained and no work had been done after the BACSA money had been used, he told me that he and his congregation have no interest and feel no responsibility for St. Stephen’s graveyard because those who were buried there “were all Europeans and from an earlier century”. The Cemeteries Committee, of which Rev. Jerome is chairman, does not consider that its limited funds should be used to care for St. Stephen’s cemetery.

The Rev. Jerome gave me his view that it is the responsibility of the European descendants of those who were buried in St. Stephen’s graveyard to maintain it.

Normally a church and its surrounds including the graveyard are thought of in their entirety as hallowed ground, a space in which to linger, meditate and pray. In the past, such was the case in Ooty. *A Guide to the Nilgiris* published by Higginbotham & Co. in 1912 refers to “a very picturesque cemetery” attached to the church. But in the case of St. Stephen’s for the reasons explained above the church only feels a responsibility for and takes care of the building itself and its immediate surrounds excluding the cemetery which has become and will be left as a wilderness.

If the church and its pastor felt a sense of responsibility for the cemetery and were ready to care for it then, in the light of St. Stephen’s iconic status and the frequency of visitors (including BACSA members), there might have been an argument, although contrary to BACSA policy, to provide an annual grant to pay for one person full time to maintain the cemetery, which would cost approx. Rs2,600 (£35) per month, say £420 p.a.; but, in the absence of a sense of responsibility for the cemetery by the Pastor and members of the church, I consider that it would be inappropriate to give such support and I should not recommend it.

Christopher Penn
6th March 2010