

# THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE LOW-COUNTRY SUB-STATION A REVIEW

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For the past 25 years the planters of the low-country have strongly urged their case for the establishment of a Low-country Station where research work, complementary to that carried out at St Coombs, could be undertaken in respect of low-country (under 2,000 ft elevation) tea cultivation and manufacture. The extent of low-grown tea, according to the figures of the Tea Controller, amounted to 162,740 acres in 1963 or approximately 28 per cent of the total acreage of tea in the Island. Tea production in 1963 from this zone amounted to 118,740,000 lb or nearly a quarter of the Island's total production. Such teas are grown under elevation and climatic conditions strikingly different to those obtaining in up-country and many mid-country tea areas. Methods of cultivation and manufacture, therefore, vary in important respects. Hence the repeated requests made by representatives of low-country Planters' Associations since 1941 for the establishment of a separate research station in a typical tea district in the low-country.

Owing to the prevalence of the War at the time the proposal was initially mooted, no progress could be made with it. But in 1946 the movement for its establishment was revived. The then Director of the Institute, Dr R. V. Norris, was generally in sympathy with the idea and so was the Board. The low-country planters of that time who spared no pains towards the achievement of this objective were among others, Messrs J. D. Hoare, S. H. F. Perera, H. C. P. Tiarks and Neale de Alwis.

For various reasons, however, no headway was made until 1951 when Mr T. E. Walter was appointed Low-country Scientific Officer with headquarters at Nivitigala Estate, one of the experimental estates of the Rubber Research Scheme. The headquarters were, however, moved shortly afterwards to Pembroke Estate, Kalutara, where a bungalow was purchased for the officer. Experimental work was undertaken on different estates, but owing to the insufficiency of the staff its scope was limited and adequate supervision was not always possible.

In October 1954, Mr J. L. D. Peiris moved a resolution before the Board proposing that the Institute should purchase an estate in the low-country with manufacturing facilities for the purpose of the sub-station. This was supported by Mr D. E. Hettiaratchchi. Mr J. Lamb, the Director stressed that the most urgent need at the time was the opening of a clonal proving station in the low-country. The Board agreed with this view but also directed that the purchase of a suitable estate should be investigated. A Low-country Committee of the Board which included the gentlemen mentioned earlier and Mr R. J. S. Bean (co-opted) was also constituted. This Committee strongly supported the proposal in the following terms:

"In view of the probable large future replanting in the low-country, this Sub-committee of the Board of the Tea Research Institute of Ceylon, together with the representatives of the low-country districts, recommends to the Board of the Tea Research Institute of Ceylon that immediate steps be taken to establish an adequately-equipped sub-station of the Institute at a central and typical area of the low-country."

There the matter stood till, on the resignation of Mr Walter in August 1956, Dr A. W. R. Joachim was appointed Adviser for Low-country Tea Research. His functions were "to report on the organisation of a low-country Sub-station, to supervise the establishment of the proposed Station, and to train an understudy". His report recommending the establishment of a low-country Station and formulating detailed proposals therefor were accepted by the Board in June, 1957. A start was made with the search for a suitable low-country estate where the station could be sited. Between 1957 and 1961 several efforts were made in this connection but without success. It was only in December, 1961 that the Kahahengama Division of Palmgarden Group, about 416 acres was offered and after surveys by several of the Institute officers this was purchased for the purpose. As a recognition of the services of Dr Joachim in respect of the low-country project the Board graciously re-named this Division "St Joachim Estate".

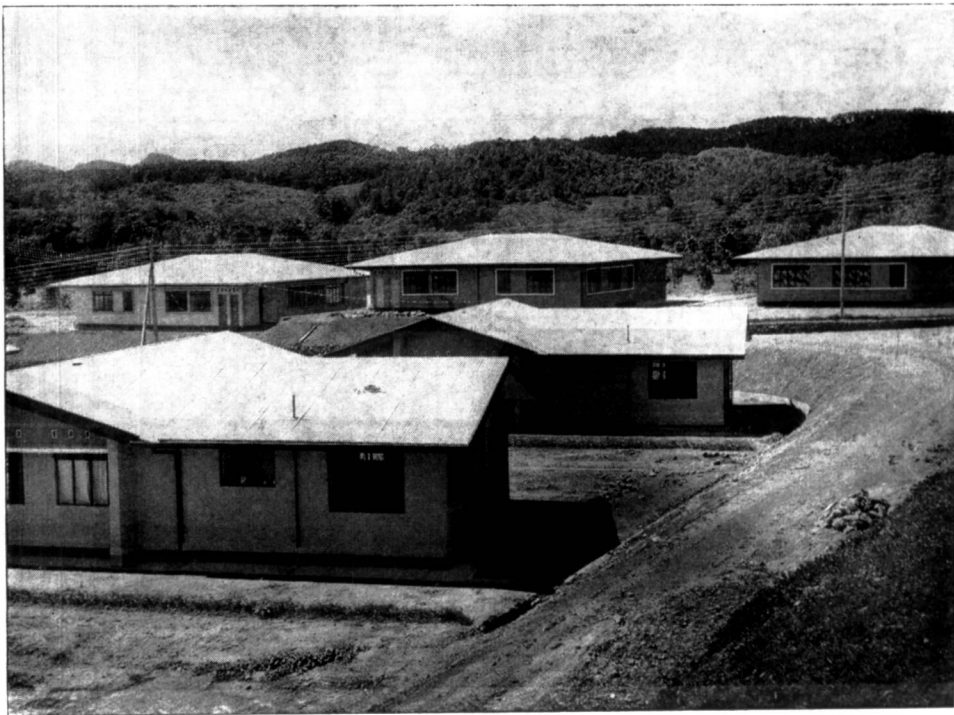
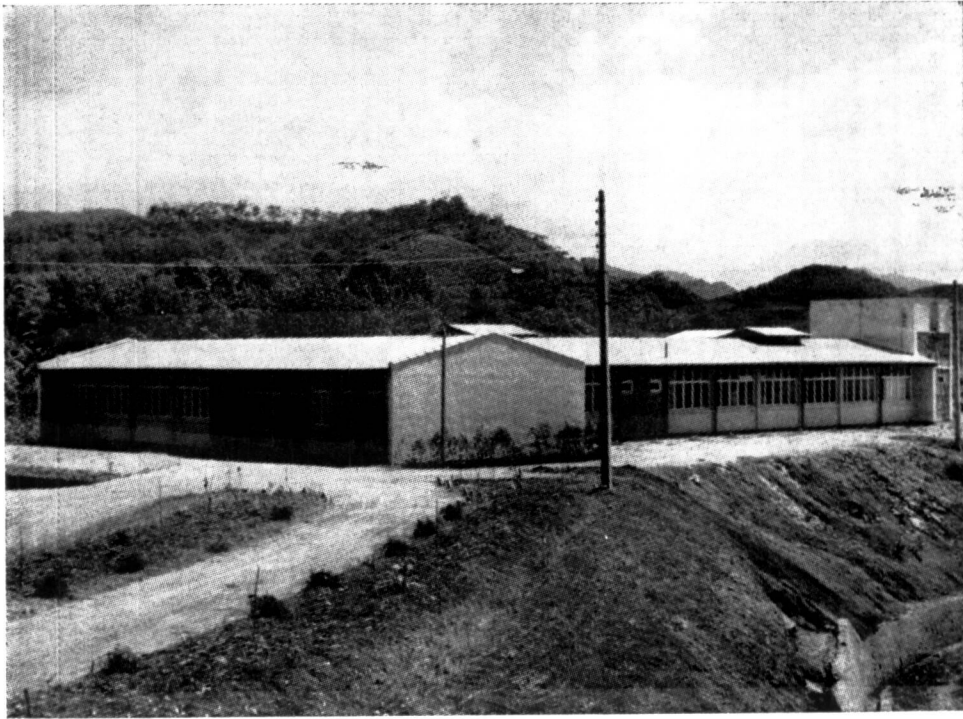
Subsequent to its purchase the estate was managed for about a year by the Superintendent of Palmgarden estate, Mr H. D. Ross. To him the Board and the Institute owe a debt of gratitude for having helped them over the difficult period until the necessary estate buildings were erected and a permanent Superintendent was appointed in January, 1963. The Institute is also greatly indebted to the Saffragam Tea and Rubber Company and its Agents for having made available this very suitable acreage of tea for the purpose of the Station.

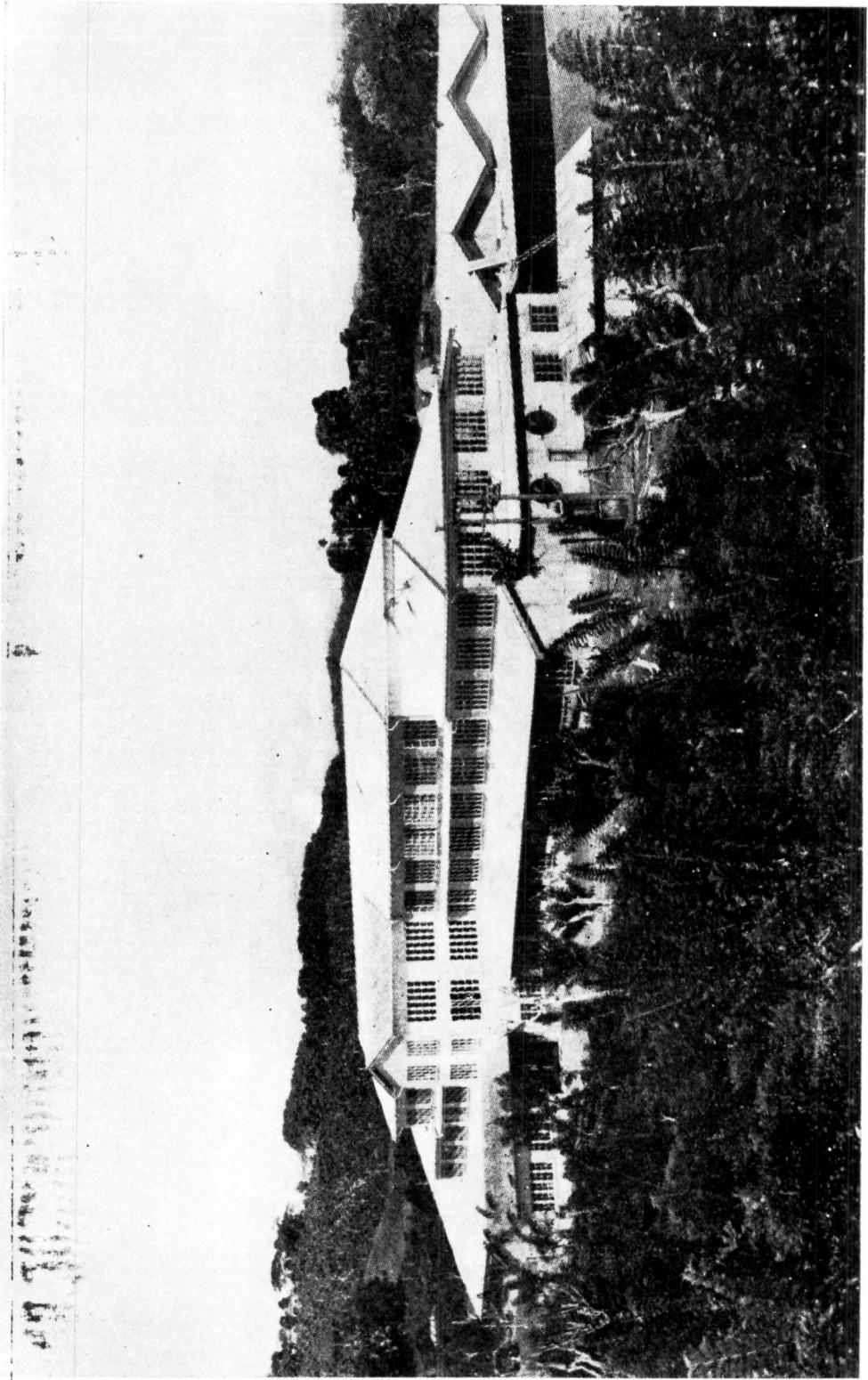
In the intervening period, the Low-country Committee consisting of the Chairman of the Board, Mr F. Amarasuriya, the Director, Messrs D. E. Hettiarachchi, W. V. Ratnayake and H. D. Ross, the Visiting Agent, Mr W. J. Craig, the Low-country Scientific Officer (Dr L. H. Fernando), and the Superintendent of St Joachim (Mr C. Andrews) worked assiduously on the planning of the buildings for the Station. These comprised a laboratory, and one senior, three intermediate, ten junior and six minor staff quarters. About half this number were completed by about the middle of 1964 when the staff moved into residence, and the rest by the end of the year. Mr R. Kahawita of Messrs Billimoria, De Silva & Peiris & Panditharatne, deserves mention for his services in planning the layout of the Station and designing the laboratory, bungalows, etc.

The factory, to the planning of which a great deal of attention was given, was constructed by Messrs Walker Sons & Co Ltd. It was generally planned by Mr E. L. Keegel, Technologist of the Institute till 1963, assisted by the Low-country Committee and officers of the Technology Division (Mr L. S. Weragoda and Dr Kirtisinghe). It has a production capacity of a million lbs of tea per annum and incorporates the most recent features of tea manufacture in Ceylon both in respect of its design and the machinery, which was supplied by the major Engineering Firms of the Island. The Consulting Engineers for the factory construction were Messrs Hammond & Co. To all these firms and to Messrs Walker Sons & Co Ltd in particular, we extend our thanks for their cooperation and great interest in the project. But for the special attention to this work by the contractors, the factory would have taken a much longer time to complete than was the case considering the great difficulties experienced in obtaining materials for its construction. The factory comes into operation on January 1st, 1965.

A feature of the factory is the Technology Research Laboratory which was specially designed by Mr Keegel. In recognition of his services as Technologist of the tea industry of the Island and, in particular, in the designing of the factory, this laboratory has been named the 'Keegel Technological Laboratory'.

In connection with this entire project a word of thanks must also be recorded to the two Chief Administrative Officers, Messrs W. J. A. Van Langenberg and G. M. Sparkes, who had to share the heavy burden of the detailed administrative work involved in its execution,





It is necessary to mention at this stage that at the beginning of 1962, the Low-Country Adviser, Dr A. W. R. Jóachim was transferred as Director of the Institute and Dr L. H. Fernando, previously Chief Botanist of the Department of Agriculture, was appointed Low-country Scientific Officer. Since his appointment, Dr Fernando has spared no pains in the day-to-day work involved in the establishment of the Low-country Station and the achievement of its objects and deserves the warmest thanks of the Industry and the Board.

The research work done on the Station will be supplementary to that carried out at St Coombs and will deal specifically with agronomic studies on the cultivation of the crop, the control of pests and diseases under low-country conditions, and low-country manufacturing problems. The specialists at St Coombs will continue to maintain a very close liaison with this Station in their respective fields of work. A comprehensive series of experiments has already been laid down on St Joachim estate by the Low-country Scientific Officer and his staff. As soon as possible after the factory begins to operate, investigational work on manufacturing problems will be initiated.

I would fail in my duty if, in a review of this project, I do not record the very active support and encouragement which was given to it firstly by Mr G. B. Portsmouth, during whose period of Directorship the project was initiated, and then by the late Director, Dr D. L. Gunn, who by his enthusiasm and drive made it possible for the scheme to make real headway.

The thanks of the low-country planters must also surely go to successive members of the Board who since 1954 have warmly sponsored the scheme and voted the funds for it, thereby laying the foundations for fruitful research in low-country tea production and manufacture. The Station has cost the Institute and the industry a total sum of Rs 4.85 million and has taken three years to establish from the date of the purchase of the estate in 1961. Considering the high cost of building material, equipment and machinery during the past two years, the expenditure on the project cannot be considered unreasonable. It will without doubt pay rich dividends in the future.

The Institute and the Board have also to thank a previous Minister of Agriculture, Mr D. P. R. Gunawardena, and the Hon Minister of Finance at the time the project was started, Mr C. Wijesinghe, for having provided the Institute with an interest-free loan of two million rupees for it.

Finally, it must be a source of great personal satisfaction to Mr Francis Amarasuriya that this scheme was initiated and completed during his tenure of service as Chairman of the Board. To him the Low-country tea industry must indeed record a special vote of thanks for his active direction and strong support for the project at all stages of its progress.