

Youthful days in India



John Feltham

John was born in East Yorkshire, England on 21 August 1937. After studying in India, he became a Cadet Officer in a well-known shipping company, the British India Steam Navigation Company. He migrated to Australia at the beginning of 1969. He retired as the Head of Computer Studies at an all-boys High School in Townsville, North Queensland, where he now lives. He last visited India in 2001.

Editor's note: This story is based on materials on John Feltham's website <http://vsdh.org/>, which are reproduced here with his consent.

Before WWI broke out, my father was an apprentice "loom tuner" at a factory in Marfleet, Hull, East Yorkshire, England owned by [Fenner](#). When the War broke out, many of the men at Fenner's joined up, and my Dad was promoted to Foreman for the duration of the war. When the War ended, some of these men returned, and Fenner's told my father that he would no longer be a Foreman.

This didn't go down well with Dad, so he started looking for another position. He applied for the position of Manager of Birkmyre Brothers Ltd, a cotton mill in Rishra, just to the north of Howrah in West Bengal, India. Birkmyre was an old established company that manufactured cotton cloth. He got the job, and set sail on the P&O vessel *Strathnaver* sometime in 1946. As I seem to remember, it was the first vessel to carry civilians to India after the War ended.

On reaching India, Dad lived for some time in the bachelor officers quarters of the Calcutta Fire Brigade, overlooking the market. It was there that he would lean over the balcony after work and watch the bloody massacres taking place within his view, down below.

In the middle of 1947, when I was nine years old, my mother, brother and I boarded the Anchor Line vessel, *SS Franconia* at Liverpool for Bombay. On board were 500 Italian prisoners of war being repatriated to Naples. It was an interesting experience for us. We sailed first to Naples, where the POWs disembarked. They were met by a huge crowds of their families, glad to see them home again, safe and sound. We sailed on for the Suez Canal.

When we arrived in Bombay, we stayed for one night in the Taj Mahal Hotel on "The Bund". What a hotel! I can still remember the luxury of the place.

The next day we boarded a train for Calcutta. I can remember that we went through Nagpur. The locomotive was, of course, a coal-driven steam engine. My eyes were always full of cinders from looking out of the windows. What a thrill for a young boy! For the first time I saw how Indians travel by train. How the hawkers carry all their wares from compartment to compartment, outside the train! This included hot tea! "*Cha, ghurram cha,*" (tea, hot tea), they would chant as they passed by.

My father met us at Howrah railway station. And off we all went to Rishra to our 'new' home on the compound at Hastings Mill, where my father had a house.

A few short weeks after we arrived in India, the workers at my father's mill came and asked him if they could take two of the company lorries into Cal (Calcutta) for the evening on Independence Day, 15 August, 1947. My father agreed. And then they asked, "Can we take your two sons with us? We will look after them well."

As a father of four myself, I often wonder at my father's response to the question. He said that it would be alright. So I have a memory that not many Englishmen have. On India's first independence day, my brother and I rode around Calcutta, shouting slogans like "Long live India" and others which sounded like "Jai Hind, Zindabag". I've no idea what the last word means. (*Editor's note: The word is Zindabad, and it means 'Long live'.*) I remind readers that the locals were also celebrating the throwing out of the English! Indeed, they often shouted out "Out filthy British" and "Go home, filthy British." Had I have been asked the same question that my father was asked in the same circumstances, I wonder what would my response have been? My brother was only five years older than I!

It would have been shortly after Independence Day that my brother and I were taken to 15 Loudon Street, Calcutta, the home of La Martinière College. I reckon that I was put in Year 5. My dormitory was located on the top of the building inside the round tower. The matron there was not very nice to me. She had a son of her own in the same year as me. She did me out of my pocket money once. My brother went up to see her and told her that if she did it again, he would get the police on to her.

I remember the meals there at lunch time. At La Martinière they had curry for lunch, every day! My brother and I couldn't/wouldn't eat curries. This was noticed by the duty teachers, and soon we were being fed eggs for lunch. Boiled eggs, poached eggs, fried eggs, scrambled eggs ... eggs ... eggs. It wasn't long before we started eating curries. I've loved them ever since.

La Martinière provided the choir boys for St Paul's Cathedral, Calcutta. Since my brother and I had been choir boys in England, we were soon in the Cathedral Choir. One Friday night, a man came up to the Choir Master during practice and whispered something in his ear. We were then told that the Mahatma had been killed by an assassin. Choir Practice was cancelled for the night. It was Friday 30th of January, 1948.

My father moved to Alliance Jute Mills in 1949. The next mill to our north was Anglo India Jute Mill, While the mill to our south was Alexander Jute Mill.

In September 2001, with the valuable assistance of an "Old Boy" from Victoria School, Kurseong, my wife and I paid a visit to Alliance Jute Mills. A car with driver and Col. Saumitra Ray (Shaurya Chakra), late of the Rajput Regiment, (and now Chief Administrator, Indian Institute of Information Technology), acting as our guide and mentor, picked us up from the Fairlawn Hotel in Sudder Street at 09.00 hrs. We set off through Kolkata. I didn't recognise much, not even when we went through Barrackpore. We passed various jute mills whose names were in the back of my mind, but eventually we went past Alexander Jute Mill. I knew that the next mill was Alliance.

There was a nice brass sign still attached to the wall outside. I can't remember if it was polished or not. The gate swung open and we drove in and drew up outside the Offices. The *dirwan* swung us a smart salute. There were a group of people there to greet us. It was then that I realised that some fancy footwork had been going on in the background.

We were expected!

The President and Deputy Manager, together with the local Magistrate, greeted us. We went inside the offices where we were served soft-drinks and Bengali sweetmeats. They were very interested to know why I was visiting Alliance Jute Mills. I told them who I was and why we were visiting Alliance.

We were invited to tour the mill and the compound. I was asked where I wanted to begin the tour, I said that we should begin at the beginning - the 'carding' section. It was then that the staff realised that I knew something about Jute Mills and the processes used in those Mills! We walked around the outside of the mill and then into the mill. It was just as I remembered, the sights the smells, the darkness inside the mill.

We walked through from one end to the other. In at the carding department, then through the spinning department. Then we were in the weaving department. In the days when my father was there, over 1,000 looms were in operation. I asked if I might ask for a favour. I asked if I could have a broken shuttle. Before we left I was presented with one. I have it here in my home, and will treasure it.

We then went out of the mill and down to the jetty, or rather, where the jetty used to be. It is no longer there. The building that held the huge indoor water tank, which officially was there for fire protection, was still there, although we didn't see it. We used to use it as a swimming pool, when we were there.

The small diesel loco that was used to pull the wagons loaded with bales of jute down to the jetty was still sitting there, dejected and rusting away on the rails. I had many a ride on that little locomotive. The jetty was all gone, as were the two steam vessels, that fine vessel the "Elizabeth", and the "Alliance". The "Elizabeth" picked us up from Rishra and took us to Alliance Jute Mills in 1949. She was a lovely vessel. The "Alliance" was a lot smaller with only one deck.

From the jetty we walked down the river back to the compound. My parents used to go for a walk most evenings, they always came back on that river path.

The staff accommodation flats were a bit of a blow. They were in a bad condition. They looked as if they hadn't had a lick of paint since we left in 1954.

We took some photos and then went on to the Club where we had spent many a happy time. Snooker, badminton, dances, the library and the bar ... The snooker table was still there, but in a derelict condition. The dance floor was not as shiny as it had been. It still has, of course, the sprung floor which made it superb for either dancing or badminton.

I understand that the staff use the Club building for socials.

We were given more soft-drinks in the Club together with some more beautiful tasting Bengali sweetmeats ... they were made from milk and were delicious.

We had been well looked after, and it was time to return to Kolkata.

Having made our farewells, we were asked to give a “Namaste” to the workers who had come out of the mill to see us leave. It was with great pleasure that we complied with their request.

The District Magistrate took off in his car in front of us, with siren and flashing red light going. He drove through the massed people on the roads, as if possessed, and we made good progress to Barrackpore, where he left us.

The day had been very nostalgic for me. Those ... were the days.

My wife and I thank the Mill Management team for allowing us to take a trip down memory lane. My wife now knows where it was that I grew up as a boy.

I started getting a lot of skin problems at La Martiniere and spent a lot of time in the school hospital. It was because of this that I was sent off to Victoria School, Kurseong near Darjeeling. It was about 20 km from Darjeeling, in the foot hills of the Himalayas. ❖

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