

St. Mary's High School, Mount Abu

A Historical Chapter (1887-1940s)



High above the scorching plains of Rajasthan, where mist drifts lazily through the Aravalli hills and monkeys still conduct themselves with the confidence of hereditary landlords, stands one of India's most storied boarding schools — St. Mary's High School, Mount Abu. Its beginnings, however, were far humbler.

Back in 1887, when the British Empire was in full administrative stride and moustaches were apparently a measure of authority. Mount Abu served as the summer refuge of colonial officers escaping the furnace-like heat of Rajputana. The recently expanded railway line to Abu Road had suddenly made the hill station accessible, and with British officials came the inevitable logistical problem: what on earth was to be done with the children?

The answer arrived in the form of the Mount Abu Railway School, established on 2 July 1887 primarily for the sons of European and Anglo-Indian railway employees. Designed by Mr Blood, the Chief Engineer of the BB&CI Railway — a name sounding less like an engineer and more like someone one ought to avoid in a Victorian alleyway — the school was constructed at the considerable cost of Rs. 1.5 lakh, a staggering amount for the era.

The building itself was solid, dignified, and unmistakably colonial: thick stone walls, sloping roofs, long verandahs, and enough chilly corridors in winter to remind homesick boys of Britain, whether they wanted reminding or not.

The school occupied a secluded plateau roughly four miles from the main town, overlooking forests and valleys that seemed a world away from the bustle of the plains below. It was not merely a school but an isolated little universe. In those early years, the institution functioned very much like a transplanted English boarding school — complete with strict routines, polished shoes, organised games, and the quiet understanding that boys were expected to "get on with it".



A LEGACY OF ST MARY'S

Most pupils were boarders, and life at the school revolved around a highly structured rhythm. Days began early, lessons were rigorous, and outdoor activity was considered almost medicinal. Fortuitously, Mount Abu provided the perfect setting. The forests, rocky slopes, and winding trails of the Aravallis became a vast natural playground long before "outdoor education" became fashionable educational jargon.

Former students would later recall endless jungle walks, organised hikes, football matches in icy weather, and encounters with wildlife that occasionally wandered onto the grounds with greater confidence than the younger pupils.

For several decades, the school quality fulfilled its purpose. It remained relatively small but earned a reputation for sound education and disciplined living. Yet the early twentieth century brought uncertainty. By 1902, the railway relinquished direct control, and the institution became known simply as Abu High School. Without the financial backing of the railway administration, the school entered a difficult period. Numbers dwindled, resources tightened, and by the 1920s enrolment had reportedly fallen to barely thirty boys — hardly enough to field two respectable cricket elevens.

An attempt was made in 1924 to revive the school under the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (SGP), but the challenge proved formidable. Mount Abu's isolation, coupled with the economic difficulties of the era, made survival increasingly uncertain.

Then came the turning point that would define the school's identity for generations.

In 1929, the Government handed the institution over to the Roman Catholic Diocese of Ajmer under Bishop Fortunatus Henry Baumont. The Bishop, recognising both the potential and the peril of the struggling school, invited the Irish Christian Brothers to take charge.





Three Brothers arrived to begin the extraordinary revival: Brother G.A. Cooney, Brother J.S. Joakim, and Brother P.C. Hart. They inherited a fading institution deep in the hills, surrounded by dense jungle, unreliable infrastructure, and more challenges than comforts. Yet the Brothers approached the task with characteristic high determination — which, historically speaking, is usually strongest when conditions are least sensible.

The school was rededicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary and renamed St. Mary's High School.

Classes resumed on 4 March 1929 with just twenty-two boys; nineteen boarders and three day scholars.

From the outset, the Brothers brought not only academic discipline but also a powerful sense of identity and tradition. They believed education extended beyond textbooks. Character mattered. Conduct mattered. Team spirit mattered. One learned as much on the sports field and mountain trail as in the classroom.

The forests surrounding the campus became extensions of the classroom itself. Nature walks and long treks through the Aravalli hills became legendary parts of school life. Boys learned resilience, independence, and practical self sufficiency — occasionally whether they wished to or not. Generations of students would later remember early morning mass at the Chapel, compulsory games, muddy boots, evening study hours, and Brothers who could detect mischief from distances that modern radar systems would admire.

Yet beneath the strictness was undeniable affection and camaraderie.

Within two years, enrolment rose to nearly one hundred students. The school regained its footing and steadily built a reputation across Bombay, Goa, Delhi, Gujarat, and Rajasthan as one of India's distinctive boarding schools.

By the 1930s, St. Mary's had become more than merely an educational institution. It had evolved into a close-knit community with traditions, rituals, rivalries, and stories that old boys would recount decades later with alarming accuracy and considerable embellishment.

The school motto, *Promite Vires* — "Put Forth Thy Strength"— perfectly captured its ethos. It was not a place inclined towards softness. It believed in discipline, endurance, sportsmanship, and quiet confidence. The green-and-gold colours became symbols worn with fierce pride by generations of students who survived the cold winters, demanding routines, and occasionally terrifying Brothers.



Even tragedies, such as the unfortunate shooting accident of 1934, could not derail the institution's growing stature. The school endured, adapted, and strengthened.

As India edged towards independence, St. Mary's stood firmly atop the hills of Mount Abu — no longer merely a colonial railway school, but a respected institution shaped profoundly by the educational philosophy of the Christian Brothers and the rugged character of its surroundings.

Today, the story of St. Mary's remains inseparable from the atmosphere of Mount Abu itself: the misty mornings, echoing chapel bells, football fields wrapped in fog, long dormitories, and generations of boys who arrived homesick and departed carrying memories for life.

It was an initiation into resilience, lifelong friendships, and the curious ability to feel nostalgic about things one complained bitterly about at the time.

