Mr. Hubert Cumberbirch was a Shakespearian scholar, a teacher of history and English literature at Victoria High School, but perhaps one of his principal benefactions to the students through the 1920s, 30s, and 40s was as the head of the school’s soccer program. His teams were extremely successful. He mentored some of the most famous athletes that ever attended the school: Canadian Sports Hall of Fame members like Hank Rowe, Lynn and Muzz Patrick, and Doug and Torchy Peden. Yet Mr. Cumberbirch’s successes all but vanished from significance and the musings of the school’s historians. However, my research indicates that his contribution to the athletics at Vic High was as important as those of Bill Roper, George Andrews, Gordon Hartley, and Tillman Briggs. What happened? Why is he not remembered?

While I was researching the history of soccer at Vic High for a recent anthology, his image repeatedly stared out at me from the annuals and news clippings in the Archives, bidding me like the ghost of Hamlet’s father, from the literary works he loved so well. I felt a need to review his accomplishments and see his memory revitalized. So who was this former teacher and coach Hubert Cumberbirch?

Born May 18, 1886, in Normanton, Yorkshire, England, Hubert was the youngest son of John Cumberbirch, scholar, and Eliza Catherine Bond, homemaker. By 1911 Hubert was studying for Holy Orders. He immigrated to Canada from Liverpool aboard the RMS Megantic on April 12, 1913. On July 8, 1915, he married Kate Walker at St. Columba’s Church, 40 High Street, in Victoria, BC. Kate, the daughter of Captain Robert Walker and Sato Fukuda, was born in Nagasaki, Japan.

In October of that same year, Hubert and Kate travelled to Liverpool and settled in York House, Normanton, Yorkshire. He was registered as a teacher, age 29, and Kate as a housewife, aged 28. He joined the army as Gunner 307546 in the Royal Garrison Artillery. By the end of his engagement, he was Private 472422 in the eclectic manpower of the British Labour Corps and received a Victory Medal.

The couple returned to Canada in 1919, and Kate gave birth to their first child, Patricia. Hubert taught at various schools before accepting a post at Vic High, where he stayed until his retirement in the mid 1950s. In 1923 they contracted the building of a house at 1040 Burnside Road West that is now registered with the Saanich Historical Society. They had two more children, future RCAF Flight Lieutenant and Vic High grad (Class of ’41) Peter Roland Cumberbirch, born in 1923, and Robert Cumberbirch, for whom there is no birth date registered.

Hubert Cumberbirch’s Vic High coaching career rose to prominence with his first provincial championship soccer team in 1927.
His teams won the Island championship in 1929 and 1930. In 1934 his team won the inaugural Colonist Cup, emblematic of the city championship, and then won the provincial championship. They captured the Colonist Cup again in 1936, 1939, 1940, and 1943. After the war years interrupted the traditional Island and provincial championships, the 1945 team won the initial return of the provincial championship.

Mr. Cumberbirch coached and managed the Vic High rep teams eighteen years with very impressive results. Therefore, why the vanishing act regarding his contribution to the school?
SOCCER TEAM
Back Row—Mr. W. Roper, D. Laird, H. Dawson, A. Hood, G. Thorpe, T. Colgate,
L. Kennedy, Mr. Cumberbirch
Front—H. Youston, W. Lund, McKenzie, T. Halket, L. Patrick, L. Bapty

THOMPSON CUP SOCCER TEAM
Back row, left to right: Jack Ferguson, George Barnes, Hugh Thorburn, D. Pierce,
Jack Drummond, Roy Bishop, Mr. Cumberbirch (Coach).
Front Row, left to right: Les Bridge, J. Fletcher, Doug Gent, Roy Okell (Captain),
Alex Dallimore, Roddy McMillan, N. Brown.
How about his reputation as a teacher and a staff colleague?
I was very fortunate to find two gentlemen who remembered him well. Mr. Don Smith, who graduated from Vic High in 1937, is 95, still enjoys a rum and coke on occasion and reminisces with a touch of mischief in his voice and a twinkle in his eyes: “He was popular with most students and with his players particularly. He was firm and fair, and the guys called him ‘Cumby,’ and he didn’t seem to mind, which was unusual in those days. I didn’t play soccer. Basketball was my game; but Cumberbirch always had a smile for everyone when he was around and about the school.”

“Any other memories that you would like to share?” I asked Don. “Do you remember the likes of the Patrick boys or the Pedens?”
“I do. They were a little older than me, but they always returned for the homecoming games. They were quite a sensation.”
“How about Porky Andrews?” I continued.
“Oh, he was hard to miss when he was walking around the school,” he answered with a grin.

Legendary teacher Tommy Mayne also shared his memories of Cumberbirch. Tommy, also 95, uses a walker now, but he is still as sharp as a blackberry thorn, his judgment is still honed, and his reminiscing and answers were deliberate and measured. (So much so, that he almost had me confessing my homework would be late.) His recollections focused on when Cumberbirch and he were both teaching at Vic High: “He was quite a character. He had a big, booming Yorkshire accent and may have been a little deaf.”

Tommy’s observation fits as I later learned his First World War years included time with an artillery crew.
“He always had his spectacles perched on his forehead,” Tommy continued. “He taught English and history and was quite an expert on Shakespeare. You could hear his voice booming through the whole school.” He remembered that on occasion, perhaps on a drowsy spring day, the whole school would be aware that a student had been “kicked out of a Cumberbirch class.” “His usual routine was to follow the culprit out into the hallway and scold him in Elizabethan English. “I could imagine phrases like “You Loathsome Toad, (Shakespeare was big on toads) or you knave, you rascal, you owner of no one good quality,” ringing through the quiet halls much to the amusement of the whole school.

Tommy emphasized, “Cumberbirch, when it came to his students, carried no favourites nor held a grudge. Unfortunately, after Hubert Cumberbirch retired, he made a habit of hanging out in the staff room at Vic High, going on about his freedom and how the current teachers had to jump to the sound of the bell. It began to aggravate the younger staff members, and they eventually formed a pact, asking him to leave and not return.”

“Aye, there’s the rub,” quoting Mr. Shakespeare’s Danish prince. Perhaps, this was the beginning of Mr. Cumberbirch’s fall in status. I doubt there was any deliberate intention to obscure his memory; it was less a casting out and probably more a reflection of the end of an era. With no contemporaries to emphasize his accomplishments, he simply vanished from the school’s history.

Mr. Cumberbirch died on July 24, 1975 at Sandringham Hospital, and Kate followed on November 8, 1977; two very full lives.
And “Cumby’s Ghost?” Is it possible, one will encounter his spirit wandering the shadows of Vic High’s famed attic or haunting the staff room in the school’s after hours? Spooky stuff, after all the old building has over a hundred years of memories, and countless myths and legends, but no ghost reports, yet. However, perhaps we are looking in the wrong place. I imagine Cumby’s Ghost is sitting in the crowd, cheering on future generations of Victoria’s athletes as they take their place on the revitalized track and infield at Vic High’s Memorial Stadium. Remember, he was a man of routine, he didn’t like people sitting in his seat; therefore, look around carefully before you sit down.

The 1968 Champion Vic High Tankards share a seat with Cumby’s Ghost.

Gary “Player” Price, Hubert “Cumby” Cumberbirch, Barrie “Big Moe” Moen
Bob “Buzz” Brown
Reg “the Tank” Dunkley
Dave “Dashing” Dickie
Eric “the Pearl” Earl

Cumby’s Ghost By Barrie Moen of the Vic High Archives September 2015

Credits:
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