

History of the Schools

The following, which describes the history from a slightly different viewpoint, was written by then **OBA Committeeman John Birt in 1996**

Looking back, it was Tuesday 5 June 1906, and almost 9:00 am, when the first headmaster, Charles Rattray (“Caesar”) Smith greeted the new pupils and breathed life into the newly formed Newcastle High School. It was to become one of the State's most illustrious secondary schools. In the early days of the school no special uniforms were worn, but the current fashions were allowed. Girls wore long skirts and frilled lace blouses, and the boys wore short pants or knickerbockers with long socks until their last year, when they blossomed into Norfolk jackets and long trousers.

There were seven periods a day, each of 45 minutes. Swimming, one of their sports, was taken before 1912 in the Soldiers’ Baths at Fort Scratchley and later at the Bogey Hole, a favourite spot at which students and staff held many a beach tea.

Whilst the boys and girls attended the same school, it could not really be called co-educational. Boys and girls were separated in class, they had separate playground areas, and the boys were told to ‘Keep away from the gels’.

In a word, a school is people. So the story of Newcastle High School is a story about people. It is a story about the principals, teachers and students who were a living part of the schools that tutored some of Newcastle’s bright, eager young people for over one hundred years - the old ‘School on the Hill’ that became the first selective, co-educational Newcastle High School, the segregated selective schools that were its lineal descendants, Newcastle Girls’ High and Newcastle Boys’ High, and the final regrouping of schools as a new co-educational Newcastle High School at Hamilton, ready to build its own reputation in the eighties.

The man who was to guide Newcastle High School through its formative years was a man of medium height and spare frame, made to look smaller by a large, fluttering academic gown. His hair was silver grey, a stiff white moustache stood out from his top lip like a small verandah, and over his slim gold rimmed spectacles his brows were black. Charles Rattray Smith was born in Orkney Islands in 1859, graduated as Master of Arts of Aberdeen University, and came to Australia after three years teaching in Great Britain. His first appointment in NSW was in 1883 as Assistant Teacher at Bathurst High School and soon afterwards he was transferred to Sydney Boys’ High. In March 1885, at the unusually early age of twenty six, he became temporary headmaster at Goulburn High. Other appointments followed until, in 1897, he was first assistant at Leichhardt Public School then, about 1902, the classics master at Sydney Boys’ High School in Elizabeth Street. It was from there that he came to inaugurate Newcastle High School.

It was a Dr Stretch who finally suggested Remis Velisque as the school motto, after the students had shown a regrettable lack of interest in making any suggestions considered worthwhile by their elders. But the literal meaning (with oars and sails) and the figurative one (with might and main) held, according to Caesar Smith, the secret of all success in life.

Service both to school and community and the achievement of excellence in all things - academic, sporting, debating, play acting - the fostering of noble traditions and the building of esprit de corps, these were the high ideals Smith had for his new ‘School on the Hill’.