

Saturday MAGAZINE

WITH OARS AND SAILS

THE FIRST 75 YEARS OF NEWCASTLE HIGH SCHOOL

Two years of research will culminate next Wednesday with the launching of a book on the history of the first 75 years of Newcastle High School. Written by Audrey Armitage, the book looks at the school's beginnings on The Hill, its division into separate schools for boys and girls at Waratah and Hamilton, and their amalgamation. Norm Barney was given a preview of the book.

By NORM BARNEY,
Staff Writer

ON the morning of June 5, 1906, 28 boys and girls were perched on tables in Room 2 of Newcastle's 'school on The Hill' in Tyrrell St.

There were no chairs, no blackboards, no school supplies of any kind; just 28 students and three teachers.

That June day was spent mostly doing the standard chores for the first day of school: issuing books, making class arrangements and timetables, and writing in the roll book.

The first name on the roll was Mina Forbes, and the young girl has a claim to a niche in the history of Newcastle. She was No 1 on the roll of Newcastle High School, the first selective, co-educational school in Newcastle.

The man who on that June day told the students to assemble in Room 2 was Charles Rattray Smith, nicknamed 'Caesar', a man who, according to *Newcastle High School, The First 75 Years*, was of 'medium height and spare frame' with silver-grey hair and a stiff white moustache that 'stood out from his top lip like a small veranda'.

It was Smith who was to guide the school through its early years, to plant the seed that would eventually blossom into two segregated, selective and illustrious high schools, then back to a new co-educational high school.

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'Caesar' Smith, the headmaster who inspired his students and staff to great achievements in scholarship and sport, and who was the guiding spirit in those formative years of the school, moved to North Sydney Boys' High in 1915.

He is still remembered and the book is full of recollections and anecdotes of his time at the school.

He was a punctual man who each day ate the same lunch — jam sandwiches and a pint of milk — at precisely the same time. He was a collector of pencils and his study drawers were always full of them, sharpened and ready for use.

His successor, William Williams, did not agree with the competitive nature of the school in either education or sport. 'Let the child develop' was his philosophy, and consequently, in Williams's 3½ years at the school, discipline deteriorated.

It was soon restored with the appearance of George Saxby, a 'deeply religious man with a stern moral code' who ordered that dancing for the boys and girls be stopped. He demoted by a year students found in a local billiards parlour during school hours.

Charles Goffet, a student at the school between 1922-26 who was later to teach at Newcastle Boys' High, remembers Saxby as the 'Grey Ghost', a headmaster 'who rarely associated with us ordinary mortals'.

He remembers the teachers as 'different from the assembly-line products of the present system. They were more academic, more bookish, more revered, more interesting, more individualistic and therefore, I suppose, less competent'.

some as 'very much the Victorian lady', did not stay long. Her place was taken by Miss Elizabeth Jane Read, described as one of the 'last great autocrats' of the Department of Education.

She ruled the school, students and staff, with a rod of iron. But she saw the great potential of the school and guided it towards producing students that were 'academically successful, cultured, and with standards of thought and behaviour which would mark them forever'. To achieve this she was fortunate enough to surround herself with dedicated teachers.

Names mean nothing on a printed page by themselves but a roll call of the teachers who taught in the early days of Newcastle Girls' High School will bring back a flood of memories for many former students and help place on record the work the staff did for the school and its students.

Among them were Miss Marjory (Madge) Henson, later to become the school's headmistress, Hazel Dawes, Eunice Denham, Mademoiselle McKibbin, Audrey Learmonth, Sydna Leslie, and Ilma Paradise, the latter remembered by some as 'a wonderful eccentric, a galleon under full sail'. Others were Mabel Farrell (better known as Mrs Whiley) and Mary Cowie.

World War II occurred during Miss Read's tenure and the school turned to knitting socks and balaclavas and to fund-raising for the Red Cross, Food for Britain, and the Prisoner of War Fund.

After the Japanese shelling of Newcastle in 1942 the school hockey field became air-raid trenches, the tempo of knitting picked up and students were required to fill in next-of-kin forms.

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Before 1906, Newcastle parents who wanted a high-school education for their children sent them west by train to Maitland. In 1905 about 50 young people attended Maitland High School, the only State high school in the Hunter Region.

After June, 1906, the fledgling Newcastle High School and its students shared the facilities of The Hill school with primary pupils. It had been a primary school since the building first opened in 1879.

Those first students soon found themselves with a motto, *Remis Velisque* (literally, 'with oars and sails'; figuratively, 'with might and main'), which is still used, and school colours, red and blue.

There were no uniforms in those first years but the fashion of the day was usually followed: long skirts and frilled lace blouses for the girls and short pants or knickerbockers with long socks for the boys. The boys, in their last year, would be allowed to wear long trousers with Norfolk jackets.

There were seven periods a day, each of 45 minutes. While the school was, at least on the surface, co-educational, there was no fraternising. The boys and girls were separated in class and in the playground.

The school quickly grew. At the end of 1911 the primary school moved and in 1912 the high school enrolled more than 300 students.

Three years later the Christmas issue of the school magazine, *Novocastrian*, was printing its first honour roll, including the names of six former students killed in action or who had died of wounds in the first two years of World War I.

The honour roll was to grow, as were the number of casualties. Among them were: Capt Clarence Jeffries, who was killed in action at Passchendaele in October, 1917. (He received a posthumous Victoria Cross for his gallantry in that action); Tom Cadell, one year a student in 2B, a school prefect, footballer and tennis player, the next year fighting in the Dardanelles and later dying of wounds; and Capt Dick Howard, considered the best all-round boy the school had produced to that time, a Military Cross winner who flew with the Australian Flying Corps and who died of wounds.

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The next headmaster to leave his mark on the school was R.F. (Bob) Harvey, described by one of his former students as 'an irascible martinet'.

Harvey arrived in 1926 and for the next six years imposed a military-type discipline on students and staff. There were constant staff changes during this period, making it difficult for the students to get a feeling of continuity or to achieve the 'school spirit' that Harvey sought.

He did not stamp out the initiation ceremony for the first-year boys. The nervous youngsters were thrown over the side of a high rear wall into burr bushes, then had their heads dipped in a horse trough at the edge of a deep gully.

Harvey found the school in a dilapidated state. By 1926 it was not uncommon to find students huddled in a corner of a classroom during rain to escape a leaking ceiling, or to find a teacher with an umbrella up during class.

But the days of Newcastle High were numbered. In 1928 a contract was let for a girls' high school at Hamilton and promises were made for a new boys' school at Waratah.

The end of first term in 1929 was the end of the original Newcastle High School. The new girls' school in Hamilton was completed in August of that year and the first girls, from Cooks Hill Intermediate High, walked through the gates. By February, 1930, the school, now with 505 students, opened its gates to its first headmistress, Miss Agnes Brewster.

Miss Brewster, remembered by

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This period had its lighter moments. During air raid drills the girls ran from the school and laid on the hockey fields with their tunics over their heads, thus exposing a sea of Bombay bloomers. There is no record of a teacher following suit.

It was Miss Read who issued an instruction to staff and students that there was to be no fraternisation with their counterparts from the school across the road, Newcastle Home Science High (later Hunter High and now part of Newcastle High).

Any person found guilty of this offence was ruthlessly punished. One senior prefect was assembled in front of the school and had her badge, pocket and handbag hacked off when all she did was to be seen to be friendly with a girl from the school across the road.

The stupidity of the edict became very apparent when the sewer main to Girls' High was cut and between 600 and 700 girls had to cross the road to use the toilets. The staff didn't dare do the same; some ventured into nearby private homes and others obviously exercised enormous self-control rather than face the wrath of Miss Read.

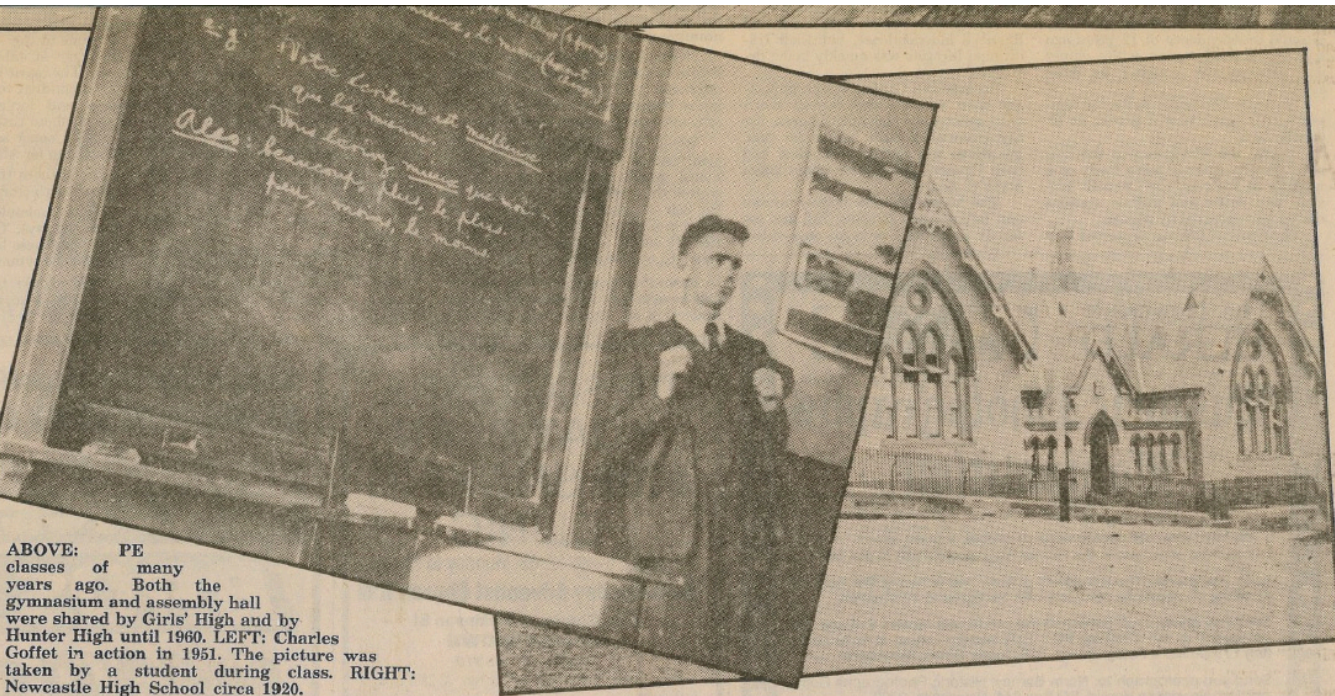
Miss Read retired in 1942 and today is remembered by some as a headmistress of strength and vision.

Her successor was Madge Henson, a woman described as being as 'neat as an algebraic equation' and whose sister, Miss Dorothy Henson, was the headmistress of Home Science High across the road.

Between them the two sisters ruled over 2000 students and it was a comment at the time that the education of young Novocastrians was in good hands, those of the Henson sisters and the Marist Brothers.

The school had five headmistresses between 1945 and 1957. Misses A. Weddell, E. Booth, P. Smith, S. Pavn, and D. Wallent. Mrs Val Wells arrived at Girls' High in 1958 and remained there until 1974 and during that period she was involved in the winds of change sweeping through the NSW education system — unwelcome changes in many respects because they threatened the foundations on which both Newcastle Boys' and Girls' high schools had been built.

When Mearns left in 1944 he was replaced by William Pillans, a headmaster whose stay was relatively uneventful.



ABOVE: PE classes of many years ago. Both the gymnasium and assembly hall were shared by Girls' High and by Hunter High until 1960. LEFT: Charles Goffet in action in 1951. The picture was taken by a student during class. RIGHT: Newcastle High School circa 1920.

It was Mrs Wells who helped smooth the transition from a selective girls' high school to the co-educational Newcastle High School which emerged.

The boys remained on The Hill and by 1932 there were 700 enrolled there as well as another 120 in an annex in the Hunter St Tech College. However, a year later they were on the move to Waratah.

It was at Waratah in 1935 that Mr N. (Rosco) Mearns entered the gates to begin 10 years as headmaster.

Mearns was, according to one of his former students, 'legend in his own time'. He called all pupils "gentlemen" and even announced holidays for such occasions as the sinking of the Italian battleship, *Bartolomeo Colleoni* during World War II. Mearns's reign was unorthodox but in many ways effective.

World War II also took its toll of old boys. More than 500 joined the forces, with the RAAF predominating. By May, 1945, 51 had been killed, 14 were missing and 13 were decorated for gallantry.

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In 1948, Mr F.H. (Harold) Beard

became the headmaster. He was no stranger to the school, having served as deputy to Mearns in the early 1940s. His was to be a reign of 16 years and the effect he had on the students is summed up in the book in their own words. For example: 'There was always something special about him — an aura as much from himself as from the position he held'; 'He was ahead of his time — or perhaps behind it; a Thomas Arnold reincarnated in that he believed in the best as far as the boys were concerned.'

One of Beard's strong beliefs was the teaching of current affairs and he used the school's PA system for 10 minutes a day to deliver current-affairs bulletins, often to the chagrin of teachers who were trying to teach a class.

The school had many teachers who left their mark on the school and the students, among them Fred Smith, Charlie Goffet and Jock Anderson.

There are many 'Goofy' Goffet stories in the book, like the one when he found something wrong with his bicycle on his way to school and on seeing a young lad with a bike and wearing the school colours he commandeered it and, doubling the youngster, got to

school on time. Unfortunately, the youngster was heading for Junior High (the school colours were the same) and so he was very late.

Mr Goffet taught generations of boys French at Newcastle Boys', for he taught at the school between 1942 and 1975. He was also involved in sport and was well known for his ability to coax great performances from some of the boys, particularly in athletics.

Harold Beard retired in 1963 and was replaced by Mr L.T. (Tom) Richardson. Like Miss Wells at the girls' high, Mr Richardson was in the forefront of the changes to the two schools. He joined forces with Mrs Wells to try to avert the death of the selective schools.

In June, 1973, the two principals, seeing the writing on the wall, urged that both schools should amalgamate to become a selective co-educational school. Before and after this there were meetings of parents and of teachers who would be affected by the changes.

But the then Minister for Education, Mr Willis, would not back down. 'There is no chance whatever that I will review any decision on ending the selective school system in Newcastle,' he stated in August, 1973.

So Newcastle Girls' and Hunter high schools were amalgamated to become the co-educational Newcastle High School, and Newcastle Boys' High became Waratah High School. The amalgamation was completed in 1979.

Mrs Wells believes that a selective high school system will re-emerge in Newcastle and she can see it already happening at Newcastle High School. This is reflected in the increasing number of applications received from students living in outer areas who want to attend the school. In 1980 there were 12; in 1982, 58.

The present headmaster of Newcastle High is Mr Colin Worth, and it is perhaps fitting that he is a former student of Newcastle Boys' High who had Harold Beard as a headmaster. The ideals and attitudes of his former headmaster have, to some degree, been followed by Colin Worth since he took over the school in 1977.

He now leads a school with more than 1100 students and, with the uneasy amalgamation period long past, he has set about restoring it to its past glory.

Mr Worth has this to say about today's Newcastle High School: 'I see the school as a continuation, to

some degree, of its namesakes — not necessarily as a successor, but as a modern version of the selective schools. With a comprehensive school we try to look after them all; those who are intellectually better, and the average student, as well as catering for the specialists. The criterion which we have developed is caring; we maintain an attitude of caring for both pupils and staff.'

These sentiments would surely have been acceptable to Charles Rattray Smith on that day in June, 1906, when he invited 28 students into Room 2 to sit on the tables.

It is perhaps fitting that the building in which it all began has been reborn. In September, 1982, pupils from Newcastle East Public School started marching up The Hill again to a restored 'school on The Hill', some of them to the same rooms where Newcastle High School started all those years ago.

Copies of *Newcastle High School, The First 75 Years* ordered before next Wednesday will be at the pre-publication price of \$29.50; after publication it will rise to \$35. The book is case bound and lavishly illustrated. The launching will be at the school at 1.30pm.