

trends

THE H

'Old Girls' celebrate



Mrs Olive Wallwork ... likes to come and listen.

By ELIZABETH POTTER

REUNIONS are funny things, no less school reunions, often evoking a mixture of emotions ranging from boredom to delicious nostalgia.

Having experienced and somehow survived eminently forgettable schooldays, I developed an unfairly cynical attitude to the whole thing, believing reunions were for people who lacked satisfaction in the present and therefore looked to the past as a Golden Age, when life was still full of hope and promise.

It's also quite rare to see a tradition of reunions kept alive for any length of time. Good intentions are soon forgotten and enthusiasm is quick to wear off.

However, the track record for the Newcastle Girls' High School Reunions appears to indicate otherwise.

Although some proudly proclaimed they had never missed a dinner, the occasion was certainly not a serious affair. How could it be with several hundred women, aged from mid-20s to 80s, some travelling from interstate, drinking talking and laughing over old school days? Admittedly, some may come out of curiosity, but even to an outsider, it was clear that the 'Old Girls' were proud of their connection with their school.

Mrs Olive Wallwork, of Newcastle, who was the oldest 'Old Girl' at Friday's dinner and possibly the oldest surviving 'Old Girl', left school in 1917 when she was 15. Although there aren't any of her classmates at the dinners any more, it was quite evident from the glow on her face that she got more than a slight buzz from the evening.

'I just like to come and listen to

with such gentle Gilbert & Sullivan ditties as *When a Merry Maiden Marries*.

'When you come here, despite the differences that may have developed over the years, the years drop away and it's as if you're back at school,' was how Jean Bradbury, class of 1940 and incoming president for 1986, saw it.

The 'Girls' may look a little different but they certainly don't feel it and it's possibly the absence of any males which adds to the very relaxed and informal feeling that marked the evening.

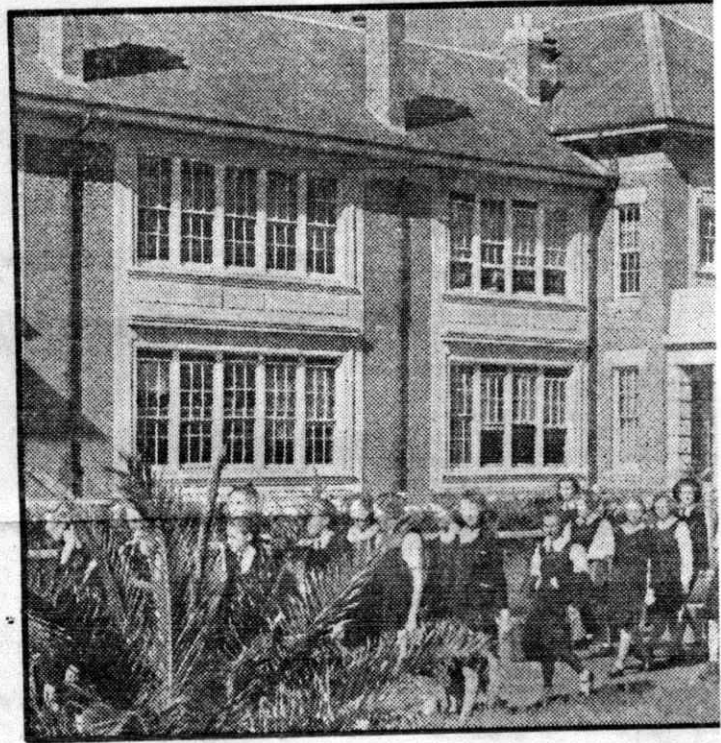
So what makes Newcastle Girls' High different?

Perhaps it's the tradition of the 'old school-tie', so often disparaged in recent years, which is something peculiar to the 'better schools'.

'Certainly in the old days, there was a spirit of togetherness and tradition,' Mrs Bradbury said.

'There were some remarkable principals and the school seemed to attract equally good staff.'

One such principal Mrs Bradbury referred to was Elizabeth Jane Read, a woman of her time with a good straight back and good, strong



Newcastle Girls' High ... occupied

craftier to get away with things, was told.

The original Newcastle High, on The Hill, was co-ed. From 1928 until 1977, the Newcastle Girls' High and Boys' High Schools were split into single-sex schools, with the girls staying at Hamilton and the boys moving to Waratah.

During their heyday, the two schools occupied an impressive place in the social fabric of Newcastle, albeit an elitist one.

Despite the breakdown of the selective policy, Joan Derkenne, nee Grierson, of the class of 1924, believed that the selective system had its good points.

'In those days Newcastle High had a unique position,' she said.

'It was selective so you had to be good. They were getting the best of the bunch and we had a lot of high achievers in sport and in other fields.'

Without doubt, Newcastle Girls' High School has been the spawning ground for many impressive names among them Stella Cornelius, Cornelius Fur fame, Professor Bernashar, nee Scott, Professor Geology and the first woman de-

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ate a rare record



Mrs Dora Birtles ... Newcastle to her boot soles.

pressive place in the social fabric.

TOSSING her legs up on the lounge to rest before the big night at the reunion dinner, Dora Birtles, a student at the old school on The Hill and teacher at Newcastle High and then Newcastle Boys' High from 1928 to 1930, travelled from Mosman to attend the reunion dinner, but said this would most likely be her last reunion.

With her shoulder-length white hair caught up nonchalantly in a pink-and-mauve ribbon, Mrs Birtles carried a delightful bohemian energy which expressed itself in her animated and determined face. Refreshing and unpredictable, she was involved in some unusual situations, such as being arrested for distributing leaflets in the House of Commons in 1935 when Lady Astor was making her impassioned speech against war and fascism.

Daughter of Hannah and Albert Frederick Toll, who founded the well-known Toll transport company in Wickham in 1884 loading coal in a horse and cart, Ms Birtles was born in Wickham in 1903. After leaving school, the young Dora Birtles completed her degree at Sydney University and returned to the school in 1928 as a teacher until she took leave of absence in 1932 to embark on a 'mad-cap' voyage to Greece.

'There was one teacher, Miss Livingstone, who came from

England and we nick-named her 'dead-brick,' which was terrible really,' she said.

'And the boys used to do things like tie our pig-tails together and dip them in ink-wells. But we got on well.

'Of course, we weren't any different from students today, but we seemed to have more fun without the sexual thing coming into it all the time.

'I think it's a pity that such young girls are so sexually sophisticated because they seem to have lost out with their freedom. License has its advantages and penalties.'

Always a woman a bit ahead of her time, and not hesitant to buck the system, as a young teacher at Newcastle High, Mrs Birtles was reprimanded by the school principal, Mr Harvey, for wearing trendy bobby-socks to school.

'I suppose it was because when the wind blew my skirt up, it looked as if I didn't have stockings on and may have looked a bit sexy,' she laughed.

Mrs Birtles spoke affectionately about her childhood in and around Carrington, crabbing in muddy old Throsby creek and the very distinctive character Newcastle had with the many visiting sailors, the crabs, pelicans, tennis courts, big homes belonging to the Ash, Hannell and Fleming families, and flying-foxes

pinching the bounty from the fig trees.

It was quite obviously a different Wickham from today and my doubting face regarding the accuracy of her glowing descriptions didn't elude her for a moment. During the weekend, she revisited her childhood spots, to get it all straight. When she spoke with me again on Monday, Mrs Birtles said she was horrified at the awfulness of the change.

'It was beautiful in my time, like a small North Shore,' Mrs Birtles said.

'It was illuminating, but I was very saddened. I know you can't help change but I wish it was beautiful change.'

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DURING the depression, when young married women usually lost their jobs, that same rebellious streak surfaced and, although newly-married to writer Bert Birtles, sent her off on a harrowing eight-month sea voyage with four companions tracing Captain Cook's

voyage to Singapore via New Guinea and the Java Sea on a 10m-cutter, *Skaga*. She was later joined by her husband in Greece.

The voyage was documented by Mrs Birtles and later published as *North-West By North*.

Her literary skills rank her among Australia's better-known writers with one of her works, *The Overlanders*, inspired by the 1944 film of the same name, soon to be republished along with such names as Miles Franklin in an Australian Classics series. Mrs Birtles worked on the film as a researcher-cum-scriptwriter with producer Harry Watt and the novel and film were issued simultaneously.

Despite her various experiences, as a journalist in London, with the *Sydney Sun*, in Greece and Yugoslavia, which read like the stuff of adventure novels, Ms Birtles said her background and the distinctive flavour of Newcastle has always remained with her.

'I'm Newcastle to my boot soles and anyone who has lived in Newcastle for a long time will know what that that means,' she said. —