

## The School on the Hill

by Elaine Orton, 5A, 1955

### Overall Picture of Education from 1880.

During the early part of the nineteenth century there was strong opposition to free schools. Public opinion favoured the idea that a fee for education had a moral value and only children of destitute families were considered eligible for exemption from school fees. Even in 1880 the fee for attending school was threepence per child per week with a maximum of one shilling per family. At first there were almost no high schools in New South Wales, Fort Street and Maitland were opened in 1882, Newcastle dates from 1906 and in the beginning of secondary education in New South Wales fees were always charged. Secondary school fees were abolished in 1911 but from 1921 to 1923 the Government tried to re-introduce secondary school fees.

Theoretically attendance at school was compulsory in 1880 and the age of attendance was from six to fourteen years. It was only within the last fifteen years that age of compulsory attendance was raised to fifteen years. Public pressure, together with the foresight of famous infants teachers and district inspectors who have seen the need of taking care of young children have brought about the development of the kindergarten so that almost all children commence their public school career at five and, in fact, many are admitted early in the school term in which they reach five years of age. The limit of such admissions is the ability to cope with the increased numbers. Attendance laws in 1880 were so easily defeated that many parents laughed at them and did not send their children to school. By 1905 the position was so bad that the Child Welfare Act was passed, but even this measure could not cope with the problem and it cannot be said that compulsory attendance at school was really effective until 1916 when the Truancy Act was passed. To judge the effectiveness of this measure it might be pointed out that twenty thousand more children attended school immediately after the passing of the Truancy Act than had been attending before it.

Until 1905 the elementary school system did not work on the basis of a syllabus or curriculum in the modern understanding of the term. Instead each class had a standard of attainments. The difficulty of these standards is seen in that fifth class standards involved Latin, French, Maths. and Grammar at least equivalent to Intermediate Certificate level of today.

### Newcastle Public School.

"Sing as our fathers sang it, loud and true  
When they climbed up the hill in the morning"

Education under various denominational bodies had been provided in Newcastle but its first National School commenced in the basement of the Brown Street Congregational Church in 1858, sixty one years after the discovery of coal at the mouth of the Hunter. The first teachers were Mr. and Mrs. Webden and the pupils numbered about seventy. Mr. Joseph Thompson was the next teacher in charge and by 1860 the roll had increased to ninety. Owing to considerable dissatisfaction, however, both with the lack of accommodation and also from the fact that the school was vested in one denomination, it was decided to place the school under the National System ruled by the Board of National Education, the controlling body of State education at the time. The first school board appointment consisted of James Hannell (Chairman), D.T.Bishop, James Downey, J.B.Winship, J.C.Dibbs and Thomas Adam (Secretary).

The first step was to select a suitable block of ground on which to erect a new school, and this was secured on the "Hill" at the corner of Sydney, now Tyrrell and Terrace Streets. The foundation stone of this proposed National School was laid by Mr. Thomas Adam (an apology was read from James Hannell the Mayor who was indisposed). Early in the afternoon the young people receiving instruction under the National System assembled in their then schoolroom (beneath the Congregational Chapel) and under escort of their teachers preceded by a band of music marched in procession to the spot where the stone was laid.

In a cavity underneath the stone was a copy of the "Chronicle" and a paper on which was the following inscription:

"This foundation stone was laid by James Hannell Esq., Mayor of the City of Newcastle on 25th October A.D. 1862. The building of which this is the corner stone being then dedicated to the purpose of a vested National School in the presence of a large number of the inhabitants and the local patrons of the said school viz.

James Hannell Esq.  
Daniel Tyneman Bishop  
James Downey  
James Barron Winship  
John Dibbs  
Thomas Adam (Secretary)  
His Excellency Sir John Young, Governor."

The people congregated sang "God Save the Queen." After the stone had been laid Mr. Adams addressed the assembled people pointing out that New South Wales the system of National Education had found considerable favour and was rapidly extending as best adapted to the wants of a new colony. It already numbered one hundred and seventy schools which gave education to no less than eleven thousand children. The speaker then combated the idea that the national system of education was an irreligious one and how considering the diversities of opinion that had to be consulted it was best so as to avoid offence, that if the Government was asked to step in and aid in this matter it should not allow sectarianism. After dwelling shortly but pertinently on this point, Mr. Adam concluded by drawing attention to the fact that there were at present from eighty to ninety children receiving education of the national system in Newcastle but their school accommodation was deficient in many respects that the new school room would accommodate about three hundred pupils and there was no reason to believe large as it may seem that that number of pupils would not be found. He also dwelt upon the site selected and pointed out how that as regards the situation, ventilation and playground, the physical health of the children as well as their mental improvements would be attended to.

The new school room was built on a site of land granted by the Government situated in the rear of the Roman Catholic Chapel and in close proximity to the new Wesleyan Chapel. The building was seventy five feet long and thirty four feet wide and, together with a teacher's residence, cost one thousand and eight hundred pounds. Of this sum two of the patrons - James Hannell and D.T.Bishop - became responsible for one-third, the public to raise the balance. The school was opened on October 27, 1863, the proceedings consisting of a procession by the pupils, followed by a public gathering in the new schoolroom.

Mr. Joseph Thompson continued as Headmaster, and in 1869, the roll book showed two hundred and seventy-three names, which in 1870 was increased to three hundred and forty-two. Mr. Matthew Willis, Jr. was then Headmaster of the school, which was woefully overcrowded, and it was decided by the Board of Patrons to erect a more up-to-date building with increased accommodation. The site chosen was almost adjacent to the old school - at the top of Sydney Street.

### Beginnings of the Newcastle High School.

The Local School Board had decided upon inviting Clarence H.Hannell Esq. Shipping Master of the port and Chairman of the Board to lay the foundation stone on the Prince of Wales' Birthday, Saturday, 9th 1878. Mr. F.Alcock, presided and Mr. Hannell, shortly before 12 o'clock, performed the ceremony placing beneath the stone, a glass jar containing four newspapers and a document inscribed as follows:

The foundation stone of the Public School at Newcastle, N.S.W., was laid by Clarence H.Hannell, Esq., on the 9th day of November, 1878, being the 42nd year of the reign of Her Majesty, Queen Victoria.

Sir Hercules George Robert Robinson, G.C.M.G., Governor of New South Wales; G.Wallace, Esq., Mayor of Newcastle; Mr. M.Willis, Jr., Headmaster; School Board: C.H.Hannell (Chairman), F.Alcock, H.Finch, W.Arnott, J.Burrows (Secretary).

Contractor: George Yeoman."

Mr. Hannell then proceeded in saying that the accommodation problem in the old school was acute. One hundred and fifty of the children had been housed in the Wesleyan Chapel for some time but the numbers were also considerably thinned out by the opening of the new Public School at Wickham. The old school held seven hundred children while this new school held eight hundred to eight hundred and fifty and education was free. He also paid tribute to Sir Henry Parkes for his services in the cause of education.

The ceremony concluded with the singing of "God Bless the Prince of Wales" and "God Save the Queen" after which, between thirty or forty of the gentlemen present including the School Board, Mr. Maynard, School Inspector and several principal residents of Newcastle and the vicinity were invited by Mr. Hannell to partake of a magnificent Champagne spread at his residence, Newcastle.

The old school site was sold to the Public Works Department, and in 1885 a reservoir was built on it.

The new school was of Gothic-styled architecture and together with the playground, occupied one and half acres of land. The boys's schoolroom measured sixty-seven by twenty-five feet, the girls' sixty-six by twenty five feet, the Infants' forty-three by twenty-six, the cost being £10,000.

When the new school was opened the teaching staff consisted of:- Boys, Headmaster, Mathew Willis, Jr., Assistant, Charles Friend; teachers Charles Hogg, George Dart, James Murray. Girls' Mistress, Miss Charlotte Shields; Assistant, Miss Eileen Kinny; teachers, Ellen Laurrenson, Anne Beeston, Margaret Gow. Infants Mistress, Miss Jane Anne Nickol; Assistant, Miss Emily Nickisson, teacher, Sarah Hopper.

In June, 1880, Mr. Willis was transferred to Fort Street School Sydney, and on his departure was presented with an address and a gold locket and chain. In 1882, with Mr. George Thompson as Headmaster, the roll rose to one thousand, but two years later (Mr. Henry Skillman, Headmaster) it was nine hundred and twenty. Mr. Henry Friend was next in charge, and the roll showed a drop from nine hundred and thirty-seven in 1885 to seven hundred and seven in 1887, which was due to the opening of new schools, as the population drifted westwards.

In 1889 Mr. J.J. Walsh came from Wallsend to be Headmaster of the Hill School, the roll showing seven hundred and fifty four pupils. Then from 1889 to 1896, Mr. James Rickard was Headmaster, and during that period he raised the school to a very high standard. He considered that the position of Headmaster of a school was a high and responsible office, and he carried his ideas into effect. He always appeared in school in a frock coat and there are many old students of the Hill School who remember with affection, this dignified gentleman, who was a credit to his profession. Mr. A.D. Fraser was the next Headmaster, and he was followed by Mr. J. Craig and Mr. David Hayes.

Prior to 1906 Newcastle secondary pupils whose parents desired them to have a secondary education - as we now understand it - had a limited chance of tuition. They were obliged to travel to the only State High School outside Sydney, Maitland, and this was for Northern students who could pay the fees, buy the text-books and, in certain cases, procure accommodation.

In this district each half year, five scholarships and two bursaries were awarded - these were tenable for three years but were extended if a student desired to sit for the Senior Certificate. The Junior Course was two to two and a half years. Scholarship holders were also allotted thirty shillings worth of text-books annually and loaned some.

What are now regarded as high school subjects were, however, on the curriculum of four Newcastle public schools and those wishing to become pupil-teachers studied at one of them. An elementary knowledge of Latin, French and Geometry was required for a scholarship and these schools applied it. Much of the course in other subjects for first and second years was covered by students with no ambition to study for the University Junior.

But in 1905 the Department of Public Instruction, instituted a Probationary Student System of training teachers for two years at a secondary school. In December of that year, twenty-five girls and twenty-five boys passed this entrance exam and it was realised there was no local training school for them. For months there was agitation about this unfair state of affairs, the indignant parents being supported by the parents of fifty Novocastrians then studying in Maitland.

Mr. W.T. Dick M.P. suggested to the authorities that the attendance at Newcastle Public School, the Hill School, had decreased in numbers sufficiently to be able to allocate part of its building for a high school. Also the new classrooms at Bolton Street would be more convenient for the younger children.

And so State Education for high schools began on June 5 1906 in Newcastle when the Newcastle High School was opened in a portion of the Infants' section of the Primary School. Work commenced at the school with the attendance of twenty three of the twenty eight Probationary Scholars on the register, three weeks before the Midwinter Vacation. In those three weeks seventy-one pupils were enrolled, and by the end of the year the enrolment was ninety-five while at the beginning of 1907 it was one hundred and four.

The Principal was Mr. Charles R. Smith M.A. (commonly known as "Caesar" because he was a Latin teacher) and he had a staff consisting of two teachers: Miss Louisa Cole B.A., an aunt of Dr. P. Cole of the Sydney Training College, and Mr. T. Roberts, B.A., L.C.P.

On the first day of school, the pupils used Room 2 but they had neither chairs, blackboards, maps, nor school supplies of any kind, only desks. Everything else was borrowed from the Primary School, which occupied rooms 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 and 9 only three rooms being set apart for the High School. In fact, little instructional work was done, the day being devoted to the issue of books and making of necessary class arrangements. The slow appearance of pupils to the school was due to the non-receipt of transfers from Maitland High School. Also some Newcastle girls and boys were held back by their sitting for the Junior University examination and candidates for the Senior examination in November continued to go to Maitland.

In order that everything would be in position before the official opening Mr. Beavis and Mr. W.T. Dick, M.P. arranged to fix it for 2.30 p.m. on Monday June 18th after Midwinter Vacation. All pupils assembled in rooms one and two which were amply sufficient to accommodate them all. The chair was occupied by Mr. Senior Inspector Beavis, and among other prominent public men present, were the Right Rev. Dr. Stretch, Bishop of Newcastle; Alfred Edden, Esq. M.L.A.; P. Board, Esq., Director of Education; Mr. W. Cann, Mr. Dick, and others and a very interesting meeting was held.

At first the students had great difficulty in deciding on a motto for the school, till Bishop Stretch suggested that splendid motto - Remis Velisque - a most suitable motto for a seaport school, the literal meaning being "with sails and oars" which means "with might and main."

The first Annual Sports Meeting was held in 1907 and the first candidates for the junior examination at the new school sat for it also in 1907. The first Speech Day was held on December 18th, 1907. The ex-pupils' union was formed in 1909.

In December, 1911, the Newcastle Public School which had been in operation for fifty-three years was closed to make way for the accommodation of secondary pupils. The number of students at the High School increased from one hundred and sixty in 1910 to over three hundred in 1912.

The first school magazine "The Novocastrian" was published in October, 1912.

The School Song was written by Mr. Henderson, the song being now used by Boys' High except that the first verse was rewritten by Mr. Hodge.

Originally the high school course was three years, the Junior University Exam at the end of two years and the Senior after another year. However, the Intermediate and Leaving Certificates were introduced in 1912, first being set in 1913. With this alteration there was introduced later on an extra year into the curriculum called Remove, which was in between first and second year, the Intermediate being taken in second year. However, this Remove class gradually worked its way out and the classes became as they are known to-day.

In the early days of the school no special uniforms were worn. The girls wore long skirts and frilled lace blouses as was the fashion. The boys wore short pants or knickerbockers with long socks, until their last year at school when they wore long trousers and Norfolk jackets.

There were seven periods a day each forty-five minutes long as compared with ours of eight periods forty minutes each.

Swimming was taken before about 1912 in the Soldiers' baths near Fort Scratchley but was then taken in the Ocean Baths.

Commercial classes were also conducted at the school.

The only disadvantage in the beginning was the stiff climb up "The Hill" as no buses ran that way. Like all school buildings after a few years the roof leaks and repairs have to be made.

The first badge of the school was a silver shield with N.H.S. on it. First when uniforms were worn the girls had a plain navy hat-band but soon it was decided to have the badge embroidered in red on the front. The girls also from the late teens, about 1915, wore the threeboxed pleated tunics.

Like all other schools, however, this school had its accommodation problems. Classes were held "under the arches" because of the lack of room, in 1929 there being about five hundred and fifty pupils. "Under the arches" were rooms underneath some rooms with archways leading to them. These are under rooms two and five.

There had been talk of the new girls' school as early back as 1913 but with the war the building was not completed until 1929. A dream come true was realised when the school was officially opened on 5th March 1930 and the girls eventually moved into the new school at Hamilton South.

The boys stayed in "the school on the hill" until 1934 when the school at Waratah, which they now possess, was opened on August 18th by the Minister for Education (Mr. D.H. Drummond) who had four years before opened the Girls' High School at Hamilton.

"The Old School on the Hill" remained a boys' school and has done to this day. It is now known as Newcastle Junior High School which only goes as far as the Intermediate standard.

The building itself has been altered from the original building and it has been painted. The front of the building outside the Headmaster's office and porch has been altered and a room has been built on the left hand side of the building facing the front of the school. It has strong stone walls and cedar doors, some of the rooms having very high pointed ceilings. Several portable classrooms have been added to the original building to alleviate the accommodation problems from time to time through its long life.

Looking back over the years, were one to attempt to compile a list of the old students on "the hill", it would contain the names of many of Newcastle's prominent citizens, and also of many who have attained high positions throughout the State. Amongst the old students we find the Victoria Cross winner Captain Clarence Smith Jeffries who gained it for bravery in World War I but was killed while carrying out his heroic deed. Dr. Basil Helmore who was a brilliant scholar, has just gained his Doctorate for Law overseas. A former Headmaster of Central School, Robert Stove, was one of the first pupils and also Roy Davis who retired recently as Deputy Head of Junction; S. Carver, a Commonwealth Statistician was dux of the school in 1915 while Mr. R. Cochrane is one of two men who were dux and School Captain.

Miss Myna Forbes was the first pupil in the roll book of 1906. Miss Henderson is one of a few who can claim to have been Headmistress at this school to which she went as child. Miss Margaret Telfar was the first woman as Registrar at the University in Sydney. Mrs. Whiley, Miss McKenna, Mrs. McFarlane, and Mrs. Castledon are all members of the staff of the Girls' High School and who attended the school on The Hill.

Like Fort Street then, the old Hill School at Newcastle, became a high school and also like Fort Street, Sydney, it was removed from the waterfront to an outlying suburb still retaining its traditions and high reputation.

"And our hearts once again will still hear its call,

When the muscles are stiff that once toed the ball  
Or climbed the hill in the morning."

(This article was written in 1955 by Elaine Orton, 5C, now Mrs. E. Street, when preparations were under way for the 1956 Centenary edition. As a result of this essay she shared the J.B. Henson Memorial Prize for modern history in that year.



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