

Sesquicentennial Reflections.

Requirement: Centre block with a school invitation to the public to attend the celebrations.

Illustrations possible:

- a. Join in the fence in Church Street.
- b. Cactus Garden.
- c. The site in 1830 showing the World War II Air Raid Shelter.
- d. Position of the old well.

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When Newcastle East School celebrates its 150th Anniversary on May 11th, it will achieve an Australian first, for no other school in Australia has held sesqui-centennial celebrations. History alone will prove or disprove the claim that this school is Australia's oldest. "Oldest" needs some clarification. Lots of schools were founded in N.S.W. prior to 1816, but it would appear that all of these have closed. The Newcastle East School is the "oldest" because it has been operating continuously for 150 years. Then again, many visitors to the school look around ~~the~~ and exclaim, "Goodness me, it doesn't look so old!" The building is not "so old". It is the sixth building on the third site that has housed the school. The present building was built in two sections (1909-1912) and thus is only 57 years old. It replaced the old stone building which had stood on the same site for 49 years and which is well-remembered by many ex-pupils.

Another complication when discussing this school is that it has had five official names and several unofficial ones during its history. Therefore, when referring to the school, this could in fact mean The Newcastle School, Christ Church School, Christ Church Certified Denominational School, Christ Church (Public) School or Newcastle East Public School, depending upon the period of history referred to. Perhaps the school is best known by the unofficial but oft-used name, The Bolton Street School.

The complete history of the school is a fascinating tale, and is told in a book written by Mr E J Braggett M.A., Dip. Ed., who is a lecturer at Newcastle Teachers' College and part-time lecturer at the Newcastle University. This book will be released at the Commemoration Dinner to be held on 10th May. Based on two years of research which led him to the archives of the Mitchell Library, the Lands Department, the Dept. of Education, the City Library etc., the author has found a host of interesting personalities and events, and an enjoyable and readable book has emerged. This book will be one of the major contributions the 150th Anniversary Celebrations will leave for posterity. Australians are gradually becoming more interested in their history and heritage, Thus this book <sup>not only</sup> supplies a present day need but will be increasingly appreciated as the years go by.

Most people are very interested in comparisons between the school of today and yesteryear. "How do the third graders of today compare with the third graders of 100 years ago?" is often asked. First of all, sixth grade in the Primary School is a 20th century innovation, and 5th grade was added last century. A hundred years ago doctors were plying their clients with rum before strapping them down to the table and then sawing off a limb with a saw that was unwashed since the last operation. Dickens tells us of the very young boys who were taken as apprentices on condition that their parents supplied them with a coffin. There has been great progress since these times, and educationally the rate of progress has been much the same as in other fields. Thus true comparisons are impossible and certainly meaningless.

When Henry Wrensford started the school for the poor children of Newcastle in 1816, the aims of the school differed greatly from the school of today. The Commandant <sup>at</sup> ~~of the~~ Newcastle Barracks felt that this was one way to keep the children out of mischief; he realised that a few hours spent out of the vicious home environment of the convict parents would be a positive gain; and it was considered that learning to read the scriptures was the best method of imparting religious instruction. This religious instruction would lead to a more moral individual and prepare him for the here-after. Basically, these were the aims of education at the time. There was certainly no thought given to education as a training for work. Indeed, current thought was more likely to be that the "lower classes" were destined for lowly labouring work and education (as we know it) would more likely impair the labourer's capacity than improve it.

Each decade of the school's history records changes in the aims, the methods, the teaching and the equipment deemed necessary to achieve the product required.

The changing status of the teacher is clearly revealed through the history of the Newcastle East School. The first two teachers were convicts (and would not have to be paid) and they could read and write. No further qualification was required. Apart from convicts, teaching was an occupation for those who could read and write, but were more or less a failure at everything else. To try to improve the standard of teaching, the Church of England brought out teachers from England. However it was not until the late 1860's that real progress was made. At this time a system of inspection coupled with teacher gradings was implemented. Teachers henceforth had to study privately, pass examinations and show improved teaching ability to get higher teaching marks - and higher pay. The pupil teacher began his career at about 14 years of age. A pupil teacher at this school in the 1870's attended lectures by the headmaster for an hour before school. After then teaching the normal school hours he went home, did his homework, prepared lessons for the next day and continued with study. Such was the routine of Fred Nicholls, remembered by many ex-pupils as a headmaster for twenty years.

The next step to improve the quality and status of teachers was the establishment of a Teachers' College and the specific training for teaching. In the last couple of decades there has been a tremendous expansion of Teachers' Colleges, and qualifications to attend <sup>any</sup> one of them have risen. This <sup>again</sup> reflects the changing character of the Newcastle East School since its inception. From being the only school in Newcastle for its first ~~20~~<sup>23</sup> years, its role has changed completely. Nowadays, it is one tiny cog in the Primary wheel which turns the Secondary wheel - which rotates the Tertiary wheels. Thus, the School's diminishing significance has reflected the growth of the educational amenities in the city. \* 7

During the last few months, many old-timers have been contacted and have joyfully reflected upon their school days. Most of their memories are happy ones. Our oldest ex-pupil attended the school in 1878, and clearly remembers the headmaster Mr Byrne (1883-1894) who was "a lovely man". School prizes won by this pupil in 1884 have been donated to the school's History Corner. The "good things" of school last century were the concerts, the camps, the picnics and the races. The school programme was accepted - much as it is today - and the pupil development seems to have differed only because the situation was different. All the oldies are amazed at the changes that have taken place, but some of the buildings to be seen from the school were there before the turn of the century.

There was no parent body at the school until comparatively recent times, but there have always been men who were intensely interested in the school's progress. Church leaders, City Councillors, Departmental officers and laymen studied the school's history with speeches, letters and petitions aimed at the improvement of the school and its product. The State-aid question has been the most contentious problem of education in the history of N.S.W., and the argument can be traced through the history of the school. Some interesting side-lights of this are:

State-aid to the Anglican Church ~~only~~ resulted in an educational monopoly in Newcastle- the Newcastle East School.

Extension of State-aid resulted in half a dozen schools all within a ~~span~~ stone's throw of the present school during the 1840's.

The parents of the school petitioned the Government to take over the school when State-aid was withdrawn in 1882.

A recent visitor to the school, upon being told of the intention to celebrate the School's 150th Anniversary, remarked, "Speaking as an Englishman, I'm glad. Australians should be starting to put their roots down. "

The celebrations at the school are attempting just this, and to corrupt another's quotation,

For those who understand, no explanation is necessary;

For those who do not, no explanation is possible.

W.A.H.