

History of the Schools

The following was written by - **Elaine Orton, NGHS, 5C 1955** when preparations were underway for the 1956 Centenary Edition of the Nobbys magazine.

Minor changes have been made to accommodate the passage of time.

Prior to 1906 Newcastle secondary pupils whose parents wanted them to have a secondary education had a limited chance of tuition. They were obliged to travel to the only State High School outside Sydney, Maitland (opened 1882), and this was for Northern students who could pay the fees, buy the text-books and, in certain cases, procure accommodation.

In the Newcastle 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 for two to two and a half years. Scholarship holders were also allotted thirty shillings worth of text-books annually, and loaned some.

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 realized 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 (Infants and Primary) School, had decreased in numbers sufficiently, due to the opening of new schools as the population drifted westwards, 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 Rattray 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. 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 version subsequently used by Newcastle Boys’ High School being the same with the exception of the first verse, which was written 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 known as they were, till the introduction of the Wyndham Scheme in 1962, when a sixth year was added and the names of the years changed from ‘First Year to Fifth Year’, to ‘Year Seven to Year Twelve’.

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 the later schedule at the separate girls’ and boys’ schools of eight periods of 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 leaked and repairs had to be made.

The first badge of the school was a silver shield bearing the letters N.H.S. 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 three-boxed pleated tunics.

Like all other schools, 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 were under rooms two and five.

There had been talk of the new girls’ school as early back as 1913 but with the war the buildings were not completed until 1929. A dream come true was realized when the school was officially opened on 5th March 1930, and the girls eventually moved into the new school at Hamilton South, under Headmistress Agnes Brewster.

The boys stayed in “the school on the hill”. By 1932, with the country deep in the Depression, there was serious overcrowding, with the enrolment of 700 boys, and a further 120 in the Annexe at Newcastle Teachers College. The promise of a new school at Waratah was long overdue, with the School on The Hill being described as “an archaic, architectural anachronism”.

In 1934 the new school at Waratah 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 boys moved in, under Headmaster Charles (‘Daddy’) Christmas.

“The Old School on the Hill” remained a boys’ school, known as Newcastle Junior High School, which only went as far as the Intermediate Certificate. The Junior High School was closed in 1973 and the pupils moved to a new building at Lambton.

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 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 was also a brilliant scholar, who gained his Doctorate for Law overseas. A former Headmaster of Central School, Robert Stove, was one of the first pupils, as well as Roy Davis, who retired as Deputy Head of Junction. S Carver, a Commonwealth Statistician, was Dux of the school in 1915 while Mr. R. Cochrane is one of the two men who were Dux and School Captain.

Miss Myrna 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 a child. Miss Margaret Telfar was the first woman as Registrar at the University of Sydney. Mrs. Whiley, Miss McKenna, Mrs. McFarlane, and Mrs. Castledon were all members of the staff at 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.”**