

Education



The History of Cranbourne Primary School

By Claire Turner, Casey Cardinia Library Corporation



In the period of early European settlement in Victoria, there was no cohesive management of education. The Colonies placed the responsibility for education with the Church and it was not until the 1870s that State education became a co-ordinated department. During these early years, children had lessons at home or gathered for group lessons at the local Church or at a larger home.

When the township of Cranbourne was first being settled by Europeans in the 1850s, the establishment of a school was an immediate priority. Since its inception in 1856, the Cranbourne School has existed on three different sites and today it is one of nine primary schools in Cranbourne. It has been located on Bakewell Street since 1969.

As early as 1835, Sir Richard Bourke had recommended that plans be made in the new Port Phillip settlement for a school of mixed religions, based on the model of contemporary Ireland.¹ This recommendation was later adopted by Governor Fitzroy in 1848 when he launched his *Education Act*, signalling the beginning of the long journey towards a co-ordinated approach to education.² Fitzroy appointed a Denominational Board to support the Church schools that had sprung independently since 1838. In a confusing move, he also established a National Board of Education to organise the development of secular schools.

By the 1850s, the two bodies were unable to agree on the future development of education. The Denominational Board issued a report in 1852 that highlighted the need for a single organisation and concluded that: ‘...there should be but one system of State support for the Schools in this colony...’.³ By 1862, the Church system had emerged as the more successful of the two, with a higher attendance rate and more schools in operation.⁴

The Church maintained a strong involvement in the early development of education in rural Australia. Religion played an important role in young pioneering communities as a traditional and familiar social framework that people could look to for stability. The responsibility of providing an education to the colonies’ youth also rested with the local Church community. There would often be select members of the congregation who were prepared to give local children both secular and religious instruction. In

Cranbourne, this is recorded as having been a young gentleman called Frederick Parker, who held a small school and Sunday school at his home and also conducted some of the early Anglican services during the 1850s and 60s.⁵

The first church to be built in Cranbourne was the Presbyterian church in Sladen Street. A majority of the early settlers in Cranbourne and indeed in this region, belonged to the Presbyterian faith. The Presbyterian Church was a leader in the establishment of schools in Victoria. Their first school was erected in Collins Street in 1838, just three years after the settlement that was to become Melbourne was populated.⁶ The Reverend Alexander Duff is recorded as having been instrumental in both the establishment of the Church and of the first Cranbourne school.

The Cranbourne Primary School has a long history. A school is always at the heart of a community, being experienced by all at some time, whether as students, teachers or as parents. The Cranbourne school grew with the town and by the 1970s the town had developed to more closely resemble a suburb. In contrast to the modest building erected in the 1850s, there are now nine primary schools to service the explosion in population. Many residents still remember their days at Cranbourne Primary School: their teachers, lessons and friends. Their memories of the school that stood on the South Gippsland Highway for nearly one hundred years remain, but sadly the old building is gone.

¹ Pauline Jones (ed), *Historical Records Of Victoria, Beginnings of Permanent Government*, vol. 1, Victorian Government Printing Office, Melbourne, 1981, p. 18.

² L. J. Blake (ed), *Vision and Realization: a Centenary History of State Education in Victoria*, vol. 1, Education Department of Victoria, Melbourne, 1973, p. 17.

³ L.J.Blake, p. 40.

⁴ L. J. Blake, p. 83.

⁵ *One Hundred Years and More: The Story of the Founding and Development of the Parish of St. John the Evangelist Cranbourne*, 1966, p.4. Mr. Parker received numerous mentions in the early Church minutes, including leasing his premises to the first Anglican Minister in Cranbourne.

⁶ L.J.Blake, p.6.

Cranbourne's First School - Sladen Street

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Duff made an application to the Denominational Board for the establishment of a school on 24th December 1855. He wrote: 'As the necessity for the establishment of a school at Cranbourne is very urgent (no school being nearer than Dandenong which is ten miles distant) I trust the Board will take this application into their early consideration.'⁷ It is interesting and perhaps an example of his trademark tenacity that Duff wrote his letter on Christmas Eve, possibly in an attempt to find the Denominational Board in a festive mood. It was extremely difficult to receive funding for schools during this time, due to the rapid expansion of rural populations created by the Gold Rush. It is a significant demonstration of the persuasive clout wielded by Duff and his wealthy Presbyterian counterparts, that the application was successful and the Crown Grant of land provided. It is even more startling that just five years later, they again received funding from the fragile Denominational Board, to extend the school to accommodate students as boarders.

The residents, presumably those belonging to the Presbyterian church and possibly also others in the town, built the school and it was opened just five months after the application was made, in May, 1856.⁸ Trustees included A. Cameron, A. Patterson and J. Lecky, who collectively

formed Cranbourne's land-owning power base. This first school was situated on Sladen Street, where the Presbyterian church would later be built. The first head teacher was Mr. James Henry, who was followed by Mr. Walker in 1858. Archibald Thomson occupied the position next and remained until 1889. Thomson was a public-spirited man, who was also heavily involved with the Temperance Hall in Cranbourne.⁹ The Temperance Hall was used by the school for concerts and other public events. This relationship is an example of the evangelical zeal that underpinned early community life in the Cranbourne township.

Denominational Schools became Common Schools when the *Common Schools Act* was passed in 1862 and were managed by a single Board of Education.¹⁰ Prior to this, there had also been a small Catholic school in Cranbourne, but it was no longer possible to have both the Catholic and Presbyterian schools in the one township functioning as Common Schools. Cranbourne Presbyterian School became Cranbourne Common School No. 144 in 1862. There were changes yet again when the *Education Act* was adopted in 1872, making attendance at school compulsory and requiring all schools to be called State Schools.

⁷ The Cranbourne Presbyterian School, in possession of the Casey-Cardinia Local History Archive, Melbourne, n.d, p.1.

⁸ L.J.Blake, p.1204.

⁹ Shire of Cranbourne Rate Books, in the possession of the City of Casey, Melbourne, 1876, 1877, 1882.

¹⁰ L.J.Blake, p. 84.

The New School - South Gippsland Highway

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By 1876, enrolments at Cranbourne Common School had climbed to over 100 children. The average attendance was around seventy. As the township of Cranbourne grew, the demand for a larger school became increasingly urgent. However, since 1873, much debate had surrounded the decision to choose the new site. There was a petition from one side of the community, including A and J Facey, A. Ridgway and W. Manks, supporting the site next to the police station:

*The site we propose is high and dry with only the road separating it from the Racecourse Reserve where the children would find ample room for recreation and be out of the way of the busiest part of the township.*¹¹

Interestingly, it was Duff and his friends, Patterson and Cameron who rejected the suggested new site, quite possibly because it would mean moving away from the Church and closer to the 'less than holy' Racecourse. Their petition stated that:

The proposed new site is a sand bank covered with heath and scrub and in the summer abounds with snakes. The site is in immediate proximity to a public racecourse and regard for the children's safety would require the school to be closed whenever races are held.¹²

It appears that the children's moral safety was the real concern at the heart of their futile protests. The old building was condemned by the Education Department and a new school, number 2068, commenced on 1st May 1878.

Cranbourne State School No. 2068 was on what is now called the South Gippsland Highway where the Senior Citizen's Club now stands, next to the Police Station. Many residents have memories of attending this school, which operated until 1969. The old Sladen Street building was sold in 1879 to St. John's Church in yet another example of the Reverend Duff's real estate prowess. St. John's used the building as a parsonage until they demolished it and sold the land in 1889.¹³

¹¹ The Cranbourne Presbyterian School, p.4.

¹² The Cranbourne Presbyterian School, p.5.

¹³ *One Hundred Years and More*, p.3.

There were periodical complaints by teachers about inadequacies in the school and in the teacher's residence. However, Cranbourne had a school, when many rural places were holding their classes in churches, halls or private homes. There was an incident where Cranbourne school classes were held in the Temperance Hall in 1898 due to an outbreak of typhoid, which the teacher Mr. Lindsay, had himself caught. Lindsay argued that the condition of the residence was to blame and his

illness provided an excellent case for having the building cleaned and painted at the Education Department's expense.¹⁴ Earlier, Mr. Thomson, who was the first to teach at the new school, complained that the residence was damp, leaked and had caused severe illness for his entire family with one fatality. There were many structural problems to overcome however by 1905 extensions to the school were finally carried out to cope with the increasing numbers of students.

¹⁴ The Cranbourne Presbyterian School, p.10. Lorraine Whitmore (ed), Centenary Celebrations June 10, 1978: Cranbourne Primary School No. 2068 1878-1978, in possession of the Casey-Cardinia Local History Archive, Melbourne, p.3.

Memories of Cranbourne State School No. 2068

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Cranbourne State School 2068 was replaced by the Primary School on Bakewell Street in 1969. It had played a key role in the lives of Cranbourne's children for nearly one hundred years and there are many colourful memories to be shared. Mr. Peter Cowe attended the school during the 1920s and 30s and recalls that '*I must admit I never ever enjoyed going to school!*'¹⁵

School concerts were as much a part of school life in the past as they are now. Concerts were held in the Temperance Hall and later in the Church of England or Shire Halls. An article from a local paper during the 1890s demonstrates the excitement and relaxed enjoyment at one of these early concerts. The article is titled *A Juvenile Treat* and reports that:

*The scholars of Cranbourne State School gave their second annual concert at the Temperance Hall on Friday, before a crowded, and most appreciative audience. The children were, of course, most gaily dressed their happy smiling faces being by no means the least pleasurable feature of the evening's enjoyment...*¹⁶



¹⁵ Recollections of Mr. Peter Cowe, in possession of the Casey-Cardinia Local History Archive, Melbourne, 2000.

¹⁶ *Newspaper Unknown*. 'Cranbourne State School Concert: A Juvenile Treat', c.1890s.

The article continues to describe the concert, with appearances from the children of now well-known pioneering Cranbourne families, such as the violin recital by Master A. Facey and singing by the blacksmith's daughter, Christina O'Rourke. There were also performances by children from the Brunt, McLeod, Close and Nurse families.

The school concerts became war effort concerts during the Second World War. In her memories of school life during the war, Pam Ridgway recalls that:

Each Friday afternoon we held a 1 penny concert to raise money for the war effort. We all performed depending on ability!! Singing, recitations, essays, dancing, acting... Wendy Bidwell and I went to dancing classes and teacher would help us put a dance together - on one occasion 'Knees up mother Brown'.¹⁷

There are many accounts of everyday life at the Cranbourne State School during the 1930s and 40s. Because Cranbourne was a largely farming community, the children were expected to complete their share of farm duties before and after school. Being delivered to and collected from school is mostly an everyday occurrence today, but in the past, children walked or rode long distances independently every day. Mrs Joan Kelsall grew up in Cranbourne and worked at the Cranbourne Shire for many years. Her memories of how children travelled to school during the depression in the 1930s, tell us much about Cranbourne's farming origins:

Children walked long distances to school, some barefoot because of the poor times. One such family walked for about 3 and a half miles (6kms) each way from what is

now the Dandenong Hastings Road, but was then Billingtons Lane, a dirt road... A friend rode a bad tempered little Shetland pony from down Pearcedale Road, and left it in a paddock in the main street during the day... about opposite the Hotel.¹⁸

...we rode bikes... and left them leaning against the side of Lawson Poole's Garage (Cr. Sladen Street and the Highway). We'd leave them there all day and expect them to be there when we came back after school and sure enough they were, and that certainly has changed.¹⁹

It appears that there was a universal dislike among the children at the school during the 1930s and 40s, and that was for the annual visits by the dentist. It was part of the National Health strategy to employ State Schools as a vehicle for monitoring dental and other health issues. Lorraine Bregazzi provides a heart-felt description of the brutality of the dreaded dentist. She remembers waiting for the school dentist and the doctor for the injections:

which I deviously tried to avoid, hiding down the slope beside the fence separating the school from the Police Station. Needless to say, I didn't succeed... I seem to remember 2 or 3 large mothers dragging me back.²⁰

Joan Kelsall also describes the children's enduring feelings of dislike towards the dentist.

I think we got the leftovers. It they wanted to pull out 6 teeth they pulled out 6 teeth and then sent the kids off to walk home. We were glad to see the end of him and it didn't matter which dentist came we still called him a butcher.²¹

¹⁷ Recollections of Mrs. Pam Ridgway (McKaskill), in possession of the Casey-Cardinia Local History Archive, Melbourne, 2000.

¹⁸ Recollections of Mrs. Joan Kelsall, in possession of the Casey-Cardinia Local History Archive, Melbourne, 2000.

¹⁹ Recollections of Joan Kelsall.

²⁰ Recollections of Lorraine Bregazzi (Savage), in possession of the Casey-Cardinia Local History Archive, Melbourne, 2000.

²¹ Recollections of Joan Kelsall, p.2.



Cranbourne girls basketball team - Premiers 1920

There were many features and routines at the school during the 1930s and 40s that are quite foreign to schools today. Every Monday morning the children gathered for the raising of the flag and recited the pledge:

I Love God and my country

I will serve the King

I will honour the flag

I will cheerfully obey my parents, teachers and the laws.

Many of the everyday aspects of the school are very different from what is found in schools today. Open fires were used during winter because there was no heating. These were also used for drying the children's shoes and socks sodden from the long journey to school. Play equipment was unheard of and there was no fancy classroom stationery apart from the basic slates and pen and ink for the seniors. Boys and girls had to play in separate playgrounds and there was a shelter shed for the boys and one for the girls. School

Inspectors were a familiar sight. Fridays were usually sport days and the racecourse across the road was a popular venue. The children were allowed to shelter under the Avenue of Honour on hot days and on race days they were taken over the road to watch. The Avenue held a special connection for the school because many of those who served in the war had attended the school. At the Cranbourne 'Back To' in 1927, former head teacher Mr. Allen, who had taught these people, laid a wreath and read out the names from the Honour Board. Mr. Allen had taught between 1906 and 1910.

The Cranbourne 'Back To' in 1927 had a special component for revisiting the school. The teacher at the time was Mr. Evans. Previous teachers Mr. Lindsay (1885-1905) Mr. Allen (1906-1910), and Mr. Atkins (1914-1915) attended, along with old pupils. Former pupils dressed up in old uniforms and performed satires of classroom behaviour.²²

There are many memories of Cranbourne State School from its time on the South Gippsland Highway. It developed along with the approach to education in Victoria. The Department worked towards a goal of standardising methods of teaching and the sometimes-dreaded inspectors tried to enforce these goals. These inspectors must have witnessed some amusing sights in their travels, particularly in rural places like Cranbourne where children's socks could be hanging up to dry at the front of the classroom, or the entire school could be over the road watching the races.

²² *The Berwick and Cranbourne Shire News*, Back to Cranbourne School, 20 April, 1927.