

THE children of Timor mine a rich vein of knowledge.

... which is a dreadful pun, given the history of what surely must be one of the Victoria's most picturesque schools.

For like so many central gold-fields schools, Timor No 1207 was established to render literate the sons and daughters of the teeming hordes which flocked from rush to rush. As word spread of a new find five miles north-west of Maryborough, a host of makeshift dwellings sprang up near the junction of the Timor and Bet Bet creeks. By the 1880s, no fewer than 27,000 people lived in Timor.

Think of that for a moment. These days Timor (pronounced *Tie-more*, definitely not *Tea-more*) is difficult to find on a map, yet when the school was established in 1873, it boasted a population approaching half the size of Bendigo today.

Standing at the schoolhouse now and looking at the few scattered dwellings, it is almost impossible to conceive the sight which must have greeted teachers sent to this educational outpost.

And what a welcome awaited them. William Fly's schoolhouse — built in 1879-80 for £2305 and featuring its conical belltower and decorative finials — was a grand building boasting three large classrooms. But surely even the architect cannot have conceived that 490 pupils would cram its every nook and cranny.

"They must have been packed together in rows, with the teacher walking between them with a cane to keep the peace," shudders present head teacher Tess Gibson.

Four hundred and ninety! That makes 163 per room — with one over. No wonder Tess Gibson shuddered at the thought.

In those days the children would have learned their lessons to the rhythmic "thump — thump — thump" of the giant pump at the nearby Grand Duke mine.

Although the mine stopped working in 1896, after extraction of 216,054 ounces of gold, a huge granite arch still stands amid the mullock heaps as a reminder.

This arch was an integral part of a large pumping engine, housing a beam which see-sawed to move the pump's plunger up and down.

To give you an idea of its size, the engine cylinder was 200 cm, two metres, in diameter with a 3.2 metre stroke, connected to two 55 cm pumps. Three winding plants were used with 44 cm and 50 cm cylinders.

Nevertheless, a high water table still conspired to defeat the best efforts of the Grand Duke miners.

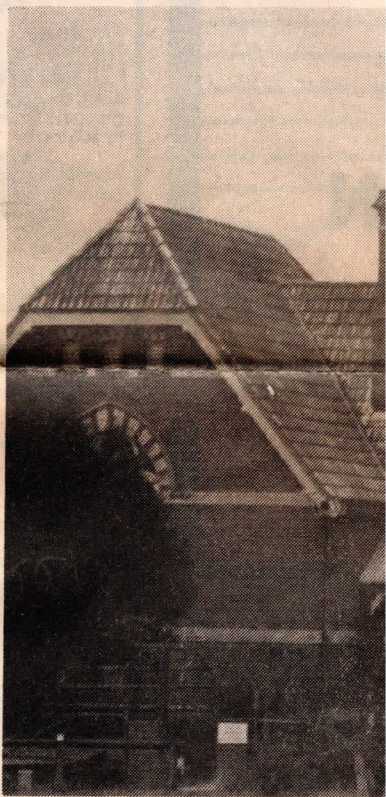
All of which ostensibly has nothing to do with the school today, except that the mining era provided a rich legacy.

For opposite the school is a four-hectare block of land badly despoiled by mining.

In 1983, the possibility of the school taking this over for an "environment block" was first mooted. By 1985 the school began managing it and in 1988 it was officially appointed custodian under the Crown Land (Reserves) Act.

This reserve, known by the wordy title of the Timor Primary School and Community Education and Environment Reserve, has become a focus not only for the 26 pupils

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currently at the school, but for the community too.

Rabbit-proof fencing has been erected, a bridge built over a drainage line, paths forged, water put on, a fitness track installed and dozens and dozens of trees planted. Some of these are reaching a reasonable size already, though they are dwarfed by the sole surviving creek redgum which features in Lisa Honeychurch's photo on this page.

In 1986, the school won the Australia Trust for Conservation Volunteers-ANZ Bank Environment Improvement Competition, and was acclaimed by then Bendigo MHR John Brumby, who wrote: "It is a great achievement for a small rural school like Timor to win a national competition, and a reflection of the strong sense of community pride that is shared by the school and local residents."

This pride has also been reflected in two ANA awards for the school's immaculate garden and has again come to the fore in the school's greatest hour of need.

Timor was in a taskforce with small neighboring Wareek and two big Maryborough schools.

"The inference was obvious," says school council secretary Hilda