

DANDENONG HIGH SCHOOL

THE GRIFFITHS YEARS 1937 - 1952

Marion Trigg

Marion was a student at Dandenong High School from 1934 to 1940, and a teacher there from 1969 to 1989.

How does one adequately convey the contribution of a headmaster of a school which he led for almost half the life of the School? For such was the role of Mr J L Griffiths, BA Dip Ed, who, in his own words came to the School "when this school in common with others, was recovering from the effects of the Depression". Then, within two years the world was plunged into war for six years and the post-war era saw the enrolment at Dandenong High School grow from 500 to 900 pupils in 1952. It is interesting to note that the Langford years also spanned sixteen years. The two years between these headmasters (1935-36) were presided over by Dr A V James. Dr James, noted author of geography textbooks and keen naturalist, introduced the students to the pleasures of geology and its excursions into fossils and gorges.

Mr Griffiths came to Dandenong from University High School where he had been Vice-Principal since 1915. Listen to a gathering of ex-students who attended DHS in the pre-war years and you will hear that the School loomed very large in their lives. In many cases this was physically the case - the Gippsland traintravellers left home in the dark, there was no lighting in their carriages attached to goods trains, and they left Dandenong to return home as late as 6PM. There were no subsidised buses, no refunds of conveyance expenses, and tuition fees were charged in all forms. Education was valued by parents, staff, dare I say pupils, and especially by J L Griffiths. The overpowering sentiment from the "exies" seemed to be that each pupil was encouraged to fulfil his/her potential - the School Motto in action. A Dandenong High School pupil was the equal of any pupil in the State and in many cases, much better.

So we read in the *Gates* of records broken in Combined Sports; in 1939 Dave Morris and Trevor Jones made triple records each in the running and long jump events. The Junior Hockey race broke the existing record with its team consisting of L de Graff, P Dawson, I Stook, A McDowell, N Donnelly and J McCallum.

Miss Broughton, Headmistress from 1938 to 1942 and Mr Athol Hesketh inspired swimmers to take the Treadwell Shield Premiership of Victoria, usually won by an adult bayside club, not a secondary school. A letter from Mr Pleydell, Royal Life Saving Society, reads "...I am delighted to inform you that your school has also won the Wilma Yarborough Lewis Excellence Cup and the Cr C F Carden Cup, which is indeed a very wonderful performance. I doubt if it has ever been equalled by any school in Victoria."

Miss Braithwaite inspired the hockey team which reached its peak in 1940. Not a goal was scored against it in B Section, and it defeated the premiers of A Section (University High School) in a challenge match. The shield is still in our possession. Two of the team, Marion Dawson and Edna Gascoigne, were selected to play in the Victorian interstate team.

Music flourished under Miss A E Doherty. The music room was situated above "Griff's" office, and many times he mounted the steps to ask for a repeat performance of one of his favourites. In the post-war years Miss Lillian Rofe and Mr W A McCubbin were appointed to the staff, and with Miss Edna Dawson, musical concerts and productions became a prominent part of school life. With the presentation of *Hansel and Gretel* in the Dandenong Town Hall in 1951, Mr Griffith's heart must have swelled with pride. Soloists, actors, dancers, orchestra and choirs were all trained and supported by enthusiastic and dedicated staff.

The war years 1939-45 reflect a seriousness and maturity in the student writings of the time. Did we lose some of our youthful innocence as we sang songs such as *To the School at War*, and feared what we may read in the daily papers? But "Griff" was determined that we should know that "...Latin, Maths and English are not the whole education...", although he valued these highly, and he ensured that "...the school life for pupils must be enlivened by socials, palais, picnics, school plays and entertainment, excursions to concerts, plays and factories and trips by sporting teams to compete with other schools". And these are the things we remember when we meet to talk, and these are the traditions that are still important to Dandenong High School today.

The war was very real to us all, when our staff, brothers, fathers and sisters enlisted, and especially when news arrived that the first Australian killed abroad was 23 year old F A Bishop, an ex-pupil. How fortunate we were to have teachers of the calibre of Dr Plant, a remarkable historian, who had just returned from the French/German border in 1937 and had seen the autobahns built to within feet of the French border. Thousands of planes, tanks and guns were ready for invasion, and Hitler's promise of "guns for butter" was very real to 12 year old Australians. Dr Plant told us of flabby German babies on their poor diet in "aid of the war effort" and of Jews being slaughtered to preserve the fair-haired, blue-eyed race. These Australian children certainly had an education for what lay ahead.

At an Advisory Council meeting held in the Dandenong Town Hall on 16 April 1935, it was reported that the former minute book had been lost - probably "stolen at the last burglary", so Messrs McAfee, Singleton and Roberts were asked to undertake a short history of the School "before it was too late". An improvement fund was set up at this meeting, and £20, (\$40) was to be allotted from this fund to financially help the re-publication of the School magazine. However, it was not until 1939 that a group of Form 5 English students under Mr P R Smith showed great enthusiasm to publish

the next *Gate*. Kath Keighery recalls that her editorial was chosen from a number submitted and the editors were Mildred Carpenter and Ken Griffiths.

During the Griffiths era there was no necessity for new buildings, the original red brick building providing sufficient classrooms. The caretakers; Mr Hec Randle, an original 1919 student; his mother, Mrs Randle; and sister, Mrs Lambert, received special commendation each year in the Inspector's Report, as did Mr Charles Wine who maintained the grounds in excellent condition. In 1935 a "car and wood shed" was built - (only the Headmaster drove a car) "material to be provided by school funds, the labour of sloyd (woodwork) boys, students and parents". Two new tennis courts and four prefabricated classrooms - the "Bristol" - were added in 1950.

One of "Griff's" big disappointments was that he did not see the Assembly Hall in use before he retired. In 1944 the Advisory Council was promised "a Hall to seat 1000 would be provided if the School raised £3000 (\$6000) in five years". The necessary money was raised in four years. The Hall was opened in 1969.

However, another of Mr Griffith's ambitions has been fulfilled. He was responsible for the introduction of internal Class A Intermediate Exams (year 10) in 1937 and Leaving Certificate (year 11) in 1939. In 1940 he re-introduced Form 6 or Leaving Honours; consisting of four girls, Heather Smith, Freda Goepel, Joan Taylor and Marion Dawson; and one boy, Ken Griffiths. By 1952, Mr Griffiths was disappointed in the number of students remaining to do the full course. "I sincerely hope", he wrote, "that very soon the number in the upper school will be in a continually increasing ratio to the number in attendance". Surely his wish is being fulfilled in 1994.

So the Griffith era saw rapid growth in many aspects of the life of the School, and the School today under the Principal Mr Bruce Van den Berg remains a fitting tribute to a man esteemed by fellow members of his profession. He was a man who "played an important and valuable part in the development of the present state secondary system", a man who "allowed a great deal of freedom to the pupils, yet commanded their respect, obedience and love", and above all, a man who made school "a pleasant place where pupils can work and learn and enjoy themselves too".

References

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