

DANDENONG HIGH SCHOOL

THE LANGFORD YEARS: 1919 - 1934

Max Oldmeadow

In his 16 years as the school's first Headmaster Percy Langford laid the foundations for a great school. Perc was a man with many talents- a fine educational leader who won respect from students and staff, a great sportsman who played football for University when it was in the Victorian Football League competition, a man of vision and an excellent organiser. In his final year at the school in 1934 the visiting Inspector wrote:

"The Headmaster continues... by his kindness and tact to exercise a fine influence upon students and staff. The Inspectors desire to congratulate him and the members of his staff on the excellent state of the school".

Foundation student Darrel Harvey sums it up when he says: "We couldn't have had a better Headmaster than Percy Langford to open the school".

Mr Langford entered the Education Department as a Student Teacher at Craigieburn State School and in 1905 commenced a two year course at the Melbourne Teacher's College where Mr J. L. Griffiths was a fellow student. He taught at University High School from 1912 until he enlisted in the A.I.F. in August 1914. After his time at Dandenong he went to Mildura for two years and to Frankston in 1937. After his retirement as a Headmaster, he rejoined the staff at Dandenong around 1950 for several years and taught Maths. It was then that I was privileged to be a fellow staff member. His starting salary as Headmaster at Dandenong was £312.

As a backdrop to these years (1919-1934) it is interesting to note that Australia's population increased over the period from 5.3 to 6.7 million. Mr Langford founded the school in the shadow of World War I and ended his time at Dandenong with the Great Depression. It was during this period that wireless and radio had their beginnings; great names in aviation included Charles Kingsford Smith, Bert Hinkler and Amy Johnson; Dame Nellie Melba ended her career; Don Bradman commenced his; and the Sydney Harbour Bridge was built.

The official opening of the school was in 1920 with the Minister, Sir Alexander Peacock, and the Director of the Department, Mr Frank Tate, in attendance. Also in 1920 the Senior Mistress, Miss Dora Taylor, selected the names and colours for the six Houses- Bluegum, Boronia, Clematis, Orchid, Waratah and Wattle.. It wasn't long before the number of Houses was reduced to four with Boronia and Wattle being dropped.

Establishing a new high school at this time was a tough assignment and required vision and initiative. Problems encountered included no school buildings for almost

two years, clearing the land, a water supply that often ran out by lunchtime, no gas for science experiments, and no telephone until 1929. The Inspectors constantly congratulated the school on improvements to, and beautification of, the grounds.

In the Langford era more than half the students travelled by train, and the catchment area included places as far apart as Bunyip, Kooweerup and Murrembeena. It is interesting to note that the Inspectors' Reports recorded the number of boarders- in 1930 there were 18. Presumably these were students who boarded in the town. Some pupils rode their horses to school, and the School Council Minutes of 1921 stated that "it was felt necessary to provide shelter for the ponies" and "Cr Tharle reported that he had seen Mr Pickett and he had agreed to let us have the paddock for 1/6 (15c) a week".

Fraternisation was frowned upon! The 1924 Report of Inspectors says "the extension of this fence to separate boys' and girls' grounds is very desirable". This was duly carried out!

It was in 1927 that the school magazine was published for the first time. Kathleen Brumley, a Form E student (year 8), suggested the name "*The Gate*". She wrote "*The Gate* is a good name because Dandenong is the gate to Gippsland; our school is the gate to learning and our magazine is the gate by which many of us hope to reach literary fame".

While it is evident that great stress was placed on the quality of classroom teaching and academic results, extra classroom activities flourished. Records show that drama played an important part in the life of the school with productions like "The Followers" (1927) and "Quality Street" (1928). Other activities included debating, first aid, and clubs for folk dancing, wireless and camera. Also mentioned were the establishment of a branch of the Red Cross Society and a Penny Bank.

The rich tradition of sport had its origin in these early years. At first the school competed in the Gippsland Sports Association which, at one time, included six schools. In his "*Reminiscences*" Mr Langford recalled that "matches against Orbost took three days.... one day to come, one day to play, and one day to go home". Perc also remembered, "For some of our Gippsland sports meetings we left between four and five o'clock in the morning". By the end of the Langford years the school was competing in the Metropolitan Sports Association.

Less traditional extra-curricular experiences included a Shakespeare Day (1928) when readings of well-known passages were given by senior students and selections were enacted by junior troubadours. Temperance examinations, run by the Independant Order of Rechabites, were an annual event. For the opening of Parliment House in Canberra in 1927 by the Duke of York the school magazine

records "our school assembled in the hall and listened attentively.... Our thanks... to Mr Frank Roberts, an ex-student, for installing a wireless set and two loud speakers".

It was certainly a remarkable achievement that a successful Old Pupils' Association was formed so early in the school's history. Records show that a strong association was in operation in 1924 with Headmaster Percy Langford being the first President. In the 1920's the OPA flourished with a monthly social activity, and tennis, cricket and football teams. Darrell Harvey recalled the great times he had playing football with the DHSOPA. In 1933- no doubt victim of the Depression- the association went into recession for four years.

Former pupils were already making their mark in the community. Kitty Bloomfield was the first woman in Victoria to obtain a pilot's licence. Ivan McAlpine and Don Hooper were starring in the Victorian Football League.

The story behind the school's first flag is an interesting one. The "Perth", a vessel trading between Australia and New Zealand, was totally wrecked on the New Zealand coast around 1921. The Chief Officer on the vessel was a Mr Woolcott who had two daughters at the school. The only momento rescued by the Chief Officer was a new Australian flag. He presented the flag to the school and paid for a flag pole.

To write about Dandenong High School's history in the 1920's and 1930's one must mention the remarkable contribution of three people. Cr W. B. Tharle was a member of the Advisory Council from its foundation until his death in 1929. In 1930 the school gates were erected by the citizens of Dandenong to show their appreciation of his work and worth. Mr Frank Singleton opened these gates. His was a great contribution to the school. He was a foundation member of the Advisory Council and its president from 1924-1953. Mr Les Brumley was a staff member for 32 years, commencing in 1924. Affectionately known as "Brum", a science teacher who also ran the Bookroom, he was methodical and meticulous in all that he did. One quickly learnt that you never asked for a compass but always a pair of compasses!

In 1934 Gippsland experienced dreadful floods which claimed 35 lives. In his "*Reminiscences*" Mr Langford recalled how "hundreds of people throughout Kooweerup Swamp were forced to take to the roofs of their buildings. They were rescued by motor-boats, and three train-loads were brought to Dandenong." "Many of the women and children slept in the school's classrooms while the men were accommodated in the Scout Hall. "...we spread straw on the floor and the Red Cross sent out blankets and food from Melbourne, and we fed them over in the Scout Hall."

The enrolment of the school grew each year, from 104 students in 1919, to a peak of 452 in 1930. With the introduction of a fee of £2 per term and the grave effects of the Great Depression, enrolment fell to 202 in 1933. The next year, with the introduction

Gipps-Land Gate

of the Domestic Arts course for girls, the enrolment rose to 288 but it was not sufficient to save Mr Langford! He was classified as a Headmaster of a First Class School, and the drop in enrolment meant that DHS was now a Class 2 School, so he had to move. The new Headmaster was Dr A.V. James, a well-known geographer and geologist. He was Headmaster in 1935 and 1936.

The high aspirations of students are reflected in the 1930 edition of "*The Gate*". It says: "Aim High! Mould your life so that you can do the most good to the most people for the greatest amount of time...."

The school was indeed fortunate to have Mr Langford as its first Headmaster. Maurie Jarvis, a student of the late 1920's, a member of the school's Advisory Council for 30 years, and the only person to be made a Freeman of the City of Dandenong, sums up what so many pupils of that era felt when he says "I am proud to call it my school".

References:

Inspectors' Reports: 1919-1934

School Council Minutes: 1919-1928

"*The Gate*": 1927-1930, 1932

Interviews with former students: Darrell Harvey 1919-1922, Maurie Jarvis 1928-1930

"A History of Dandenong High School 1919-1968" by K.B. Mitchell

"Back to DHS" compiled by the DHS Ex-Students Association to commemorate the 40th anniversary of the school.

EDNA BRAMLEY HONOURED

Congratulations to Edna Bramley, one of our original members, on being awarded the Paul Harris Fellowship Award by the Rotary Club. Her award was recognition for a lifetime of community service. Edna's past activities included involvement with the YWCA, Meals on Wheels, the Westernport Children's Protection Society and the Girl Guides.

In addition to her membership of our executive, her community involvement includes: vice-president of the board of management of the Thuruna Home for the Aged, president of the Dandenong branch of the Save The Children Fund, chairman of the Dandenong Red Cross Unit, executive member of the Ladies' Auxilliary of the Dandenong Hospital, vice president of the Women's Group of the Dandenong Uniting Church, and committee member of the Dandenong Festival of Music and Art for Youth.

We are indeed fortunate to have Edna's involvement and interest!