

1

Dandenong High School ... The Langford Years: 1919-1934

In his 16 years as ^{Max Stanger} 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 & staff, a great sportsman who played football for University when it was in the Victorian Football League competition, a man of vision & an excellent organiser. In his final year at the school in 1934 the visiting Inspector wrote: "The Headmaster continues ... by his kindness & tact to exercise a fine influence upon pupils & staff. The Inspector desires to congratulate him & the members of his staff on the excellent state of the school. Foundation student Darrell Harney 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 Craigburn State School & in 1905 commenced a two-year course at the Melbourne Teachers' 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 Meldre for two years & to Frankston in 1937. After his retirement as a Headmaster, he rejoined the staff at Dandenong around 1950 for several years & 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 Million to 6.7. Mr Langford founded the school in the shadow of World War I & ended his time at Dandenong with the Great Depression. It was during this period that wireless & radio had their beginnings; great names in aviation included Charles Kingsford Smith, Bert Hinkler & Amy Johnson; Dame Nellie Melba ended her career; Don Bradman commenced

his brilliant career & Sydney Harbour bridge was built.

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

Establishing a new high school at this time was a tough assignment & required vision & initiative. Problems encountered included no school buildings for nearly 100 years, clearing the land, a water supply that often ran out by lunchtime, no gas for science experiments & no telephone until it was installed in 1929. Each of these difficulties was overcome & the Inspector constantly congratulated the school on improvements & beautification of the grounds.

In the Langford era more than half the students travelled by train & the catchment area included places as far apart as Bungip, Koorcamp & Murrumbidgee. It is interesting to note that the Inspector's Reports recorded the number of boarders - in 1930, there were 15. Presumably these were students who boarded in the town. Some ~~of~~ pupils rode their horses to school. In the School Council Minutes of 1921 it states that "it was felt necessary to provide shelter for the ponies" & "Mr Islerle reported that he had seen Mr Pickett & he had agreed to let us have the paddock for 1/6 a week".

Fraternisation was frowned upon! The 1924 Report of Inspector says "the extension of this fence to separate boys' & 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 Brunley, a Form E student (Years), 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 & 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 class-room teaching & academic results, extra-classroom activities flourished. Records show that drama played an important ~~role~~ part in the life of the school with productions like "The Followers" (1927) & "Quality Street" (1928). Other activities included Debating, First Aid, Folk Dancing & Wireless & Camera. ^{clubs} Also mentioned ~~are~~ the establishment of a branch of the Red Cross Society & a Penny Bank.

The rich tradition of sport had its origin in these early years. First, the school competed in the Gippsland Sports Association which, at one time, included six schools. In his 'Reminiscences' Mr Langford recalls that matches against Orbst "took three days ... one day to come, one day to play, & one day to go home." Perc also remembers, "For some of our Gippsland sports' meetings we left between four & 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-curricula experiences included a Shakespeare Day (1928) when readings of well-known passages were given by senior students & selections were enacted by junior troubadours. Improvised encarnations, given by the Independent Order of Redcoats, were an annual event. For the opening of Parliament House in Canberra in 1927 - by the Duke of York the school magazine records "our school assembled in the hall & listened attentively ... Our thanks ... to Mr Frank Roberts, an ex-student, for installing a wireless set & two loud speakers ..."

It was certainly a remarkable achievement that an 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 & tennis, cricket & football teams. Darrell Harney recalled the great times he had playing football with the D.H.S. O.P.A. In 1933 - no doubt a victim of the Depression - the association went into recess for four years.

Already former pupils were making their mark in the community. Betty B. Coonfield in ~~1929~~ was the first woman in Victoria to obtain a pilot's licence. Ivan McAlpine & 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 & New Zealand, was totally wrecked on the NZ coast around 1921. The Chief Officer on the vessel was a Mr Woolcott who had two daughters at the school. The only memento rescued by the Chief Officer was a new Australian flag. He presented the flag to the school & paid for a flag pole.

To write about Dandenong High School's history in the 1920's & 1930's one must mention the remarkable contribution of three people. Mr W. B. Charles was a member of Advisory Council from its foundation until his death in December 1929. In 1930 the school gates were erected by the citizens of Dandenong to show their appreciation of his work & worth.

Mr Frank Singleton opened these gates. His was a great contribution to the school. He was a foundation member of the Advisory Council & 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 ~~at~~ methodical & meticulous in all that he did. One quickly learnt that you never ^{asked for} buy a compass but always a pair of compasses!!

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

During Mr Langford's Headmastership 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 ~~in~~ & the grave effects of the Great Depression, enrolment fell to 202 in 1933. The next year, with the introduction of the Domestic Arts course for girls, enrolment rose to 238 but it was not sufficient to save Mr Langford! He was ^{classified as} a Headmaster of a First Class school, & the drop in numbers 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 & geologist. He was Headmaster in 1935 & 1936.

The high aspirations of a student are reflected in the 1930 editorial of 'The Gate'. SA 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.

Percy Langford as its first Headmaster. Maurice Jarvis, a student in the late 1920's & a member of the school's Advisory Council for 30 years, & 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 1919-1932
Maurice Jarvis 1928-1930

"A History of Dandenong High School" 1919-1965 "by H. B. Mitchell.

"Back to D.H.S." compiled by the D.H.S. Ex-Students' Association to commemorate the 40th anniversary of the school.