

Graeme McGowan Notes

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People:

Nurse Law
Matron R
Marg Farley
Alf Dobie
Mrs Flotsma?
Miss Sutherland
Sister Jennings
Eileen (cook)
Sister Omo?
Sister O'Keefe
Miss Hopton
Ethel Carr
Milly Rogers
Neil Westh
Colin Pascoe
Matron Dunell
Cheng Cheok
Judy Kritnan?
Carol Baxter
Mr Hall
Jack Smith
Arthur McKay
George Findlay
Basil O'Sullivan (Barry)
Charlie Douglas
Sue Peyton-Davidson
Ralph Lightfoot
Mary Owen
Frank Trainer
Norm
Sam
Emmy Cameron
Dick Sutcliffe
Peter Maddox
John Leversha?
Jeff Smith
Don Forbes
John Capes

Graeme McGowan
5th December 1990
Questioner: Alan Nuske

I first started in the Royal Victorian Institute for the Blind in 1953 – it was then at St. Kilda Rd. I went through the nursery. I used to come in on Monday mornings, and go home on Fridays. I remember St. Kilda Rd, in those days, as being very old and very cold place. As I said, I came in on Mondays and went home on Fridays. There were quite a few of us, at the time, at the nursery. I remember the times when one of the nurses there, Nurse Law ... I used to get very upset on a Monday – I didn't like the idea of staying there during the week. I think one of my most vivid memories of the nursery (or the school at that time) was the old dining room – old "echoy" place, and very, very cold.

I remember, also, that we used to have these cars in the yard – all these toy cars; I know we used to call one car a "boomba" – I don't know why, but it got the name "boomba"; it used to have these really loud pedals, and a few of us used to ride that.

Alan: Who was on the staff, at the nursery, at the time?

There was Nurse Law – she was the main one that I can remember; of course, the matron was Matron Rogeaux(?) in those days. But Nurse Law was the main one that I can really remember.

Alan: Can you remember what you did all day in the nursery?

I remember we used to listen to things like "Sparky and the Talking Piano", we used to play with blocks; I suppose we played with plasticine – I can't really remember, but I think we did. The nursery is the hardest thing to remember because that's back a long, long way.

Alan: And then you came up to the school.

I came up to the school in 1957. That was a big change for me. I remember I started there on a Tuesday, and it was a very hot day. Most of my friends had gone up there in the year before, but for one reason or another, I stayed back one year. I enjoyed that day (the first day) in particular. I remember my first at prep...

Alan: Who was teaching there?

Marg Farley(?), who, of course, everybody in our era knows very well, and Alf Dobie(?) was the headmaster – a brilliant guy, I thought he was a superb headmaster. I look back on that situation now, and I have a lot of respect for Alf Dobie for what he did for kids in those days.

On my first day at school, I remember sitting ... I can't remember what Marg was talking about in particular, but I remember hearing this buzz, and I wondered what the heck it was; I had never heard of such a thing, and I remember that it frightened the heck out of me at the time.

Alan: That was ...

It was recess time – morning tea, but of course, I'd never heard such a thing; I remember, quite vividly, getting a hell of a fright from this buzzer.

Alan: What was your daily routine?

We got up at 7 o'clock, and then we had to learn to make our beds.

Alan: Who taught you that?

The nursing staff; there was Miss. Flotsma(?) – she was a Dutch lady, and Miss. Sutherland, and there was one other house mother whom I cannot remember the name, and I'll probably think of it when you're gone (I've been trying to think of it for a few days now).

So, we were taught how to make our beds. We had to line up ... we had inspection in the morning in the passage; we had to line up, and Sister Jennings would inspect our hands and our clothes. Then we would go for breakfast in the cold, old dining room.

Alan: What was breakfast?

Eileen's cooking, of course. I believe that in the winter, it was porridge and toast and milk.

Alan: Were the boys kept separate from the girls?

Oh, yes. That went on at Burwood too.

So, from there, we had breakfast, then we cleaned our teeth, go to the treatment room if you needed to ...

Alan: Yes, tell us about that.

I can't remember where the treatment room was, exactly. Of course, you had the sisters – there was Sister Omo, Sister O'Keefe (I think she was at St. Kilda Rd ... yes she was) – they were two of the sisters that I can remember at that time. We used to go in for our treatment if we needed it – like if you had a cold, or the kids needed treatment with their eyes, or whatever. Then we'd go out and play football or cricket until school started, which I think was 8:45. We used to have assembly, we used to have someone do the weather – read the barometer and the temperature; I remember on a Tuesday, we'd have newspaper reading – Alf Dobie would read the football to us – the injuries and so forth, because that was interesting, particularly to the boys in those days.

Alan: Where was assembly held?

I think in the gymnasium. Of course, the gym teacher in those days was Miss. Hopton. I'm pretty sure that assembly was in the gymnasium. We went to school, which finished at 3:30. Of course, for lunch we'd have either stew, or a roast. Tea was at 5:30, which I thought was awfully early when you think about it now.

Alan: Then after tea, what did you boys do?

I was pretty young in those days, and one had to be in bed by 8:00. I think we had piano practice, once we started piano; we'd listen to the radio. Of course, bed was at 8:00, but as you got older, you went to bed later. I remember the beds with the old straw mattresses – gee, how hard they were; I remember that quite well. I forget how many were in the dormitories, but I remember the old wooden floors. What I'm leading up to is the transformation, of course, of going out to Burwood.

Alan: Did Ethel Carr come and read to you on Monday nights?

Yes, but I didn't start with her until we moved to Burwood. Of course, I know she was there – there was Ethel Carr, and Miss. Rodgers ... I can't remember her name.

Alan: Milly

Milly Rodgers, right. But I never started there until we moved down to Burwood.

I remember I started in Cubs in St. Kilda Rd., and I remember we used to play "poison ball" – in other words, you'd throw the cane ball, and they'd try and hit you with it, and you had to jump out of the road of it; Cubs was held in the gymnasium every Monday night at 7:00.

Alan: Were any other things arranged for you, apart from Cubs? Or did you make your own fun?

I think we made a lot of our own fun. As I said, we played cricket; I remember at St. Kilda Rd., they stopped for a couple of years, and then they started again – the teachers' matches at Christmas time – the teachers versus the kids; I always remember, on a Tuesday, when Neil Westh was playing, and Colin Pascoe who had a lot of sight ... I don't know why it sticks in my mind, but I just remember it because Neil was a pretty good bowler, and I remember Colin smashing Neil all over the ground. We played on the boys' side of the grounds at St. Kilda Rd. Oh, and I remember, at St Kilda Rd., we had to run around the oval ... it wasn't an oval ... we'd run to the skating rink and so forth – we had to do that every morning; we had to run around, via where the flats were ... I remember we had to go for a run every morning.

Alan: How would the "tollies" do that? Were they in the care of somebody?

Yeah and also, after a while, we got to know our way around. I also remember the boys and the girls ... we used to have these bilycarts, and the boys used to chase the girls in the bilycarts, and the poor old "totally" was always the pusher – the "partiallies" did the steering, and the "tollies" did the pushing; we used to chase them around the driveway, out the front; I don't think the staff were very impressed with that, but it used to happen quite a lot.

Alan: Did you notice much difference between the "partiallies" and the "tollies"? Do you think that the school was, perhaps, organised for one rather than the other?

No I personally, at that time, didn't notice any great difference; I think that, particularly when you're young, it doesn't mean a lot to you – that sort of thing.

I was one of the originals that were transferred out to Burwood.

Alan: How did that happen? I mean, what did you know about it, since you were a child? Did they tell you much about it beforehand? Did you go to see it as it was built?

I remember that we went to the opening of the ... when they were starting to build it – I think that was in 1959, and I don't think they told us a lot about it at the time, except that we knew we were moving. I remember that we went out there in 1960, and of course, there was a lot of packing-up being done toward the end of that second term; I imagine that that was a major job, but of course we never knew how big a job it was; that must've been a major undertaking to pack up all the equipment in those days.

Alan: What was the feeling among the children that were going to move? Did they look forward to it? Were they apprehensive about it?

I think, excited. We had 2 extra weeks holiday, which everybody enjoyed. It was so wet in that winter; in those days, the Burwood school was out in the bush, and the ground was so wet that they decided that we couldn't move out there because the kids couldn't play out in the grounds.

I remember the day we moved out there – we all had to come from St. Kilda Rd. and we all met at St. Kilda Rd.; we must've went out in various bus-loads. It was interesting because, from what I remember, the staff must've been looking after us – showing us our way around; it didn't take us long to learn our way around – it was a pretty straightforward school to get around in, at the time.

The transformations was interesting; we'd just had a new matron take over – Matron Dunell, and I think she probably got that school on its feet (her and Alf Dovey).

Alan: What were you told when you went out there? What were the rules – the dos and the don'ts?

I think the rules were pretty much the same – I don't think the rules actually changed a great deal. The place was a lot more comfortable, in general; it was all modern in those days – everything was brand new. I don't think there was any great change, as far as rules go. We had a lot more room to play in; I remember we used to go down to the oval, and we used to go for walks along Brunte Avenue, which was this drive at the back of the school (I don't know what it is now, of course). As I said, in those days, that was "bush"; to us, that was just something else. There was this big hill on the oval, and we used to play on that – oh it was amazing. There was no traffic, in those days, in Burwood (like there is now).

We didn't get our cricket pitch until, I think, 1961, and then it was just the skating rink, which they drilled holes into, to put the stumps into. I know that, back then, cricket became almost like a religion at Burwood – the boys would play in summer and winter.

The big changes were that the old school bell was gone (there was a new one there), then there was the gymnasium and the pool which were being built in 1961 and opened in 1962. We had a new gym teacher – that was an amazing transformation

because we started doing weight training, we played hockey; she was starting to teach judo but, for one reason or another, it had to be stopped (I suppose because of children with detached retinas, and things like that). That was an amazing transformation – the gym; I remember we learnt to use a vaulting box.

Of course, they had all those pianos at Burwood – there were 21 of them, and we had 6 practice rooms; we used to practice morning and night. We started a Scout troop out there called 6th Bennetswood; that was tremendous – I really enjoyed Scouts, out there; we used to go on hikes, we used to go on camps; I remember we visited the weather bureau, one night, in a Volkswagen. I used to look forward to Scouts every Thursday night – from 7:00 to ... 8:30, I guess.

Alan: In the early days, in the first few days, were there any funny stories about kids getting lost, or kids not turning up for dinner or ...; because it was a new building to them all.

Oh, I got lost, out there, once.

Alan: Tell us about that.

I got lost out in the ... there were 2 ways to get in to the ... – there were the doors out in the classrooms that led you out into the garden plots (where Don Forbes used to teach gardening), and there was another entrance out through the library; I got lost out there, one day, and I couldn't find my way back; I know I got into dinner, but I know I was a bit late.

I remember one incident in particular with Cheng who was a fellow from Singapore – Cheng Cheek was his name (this was a few years later); we were in the classroom (it was Neil Westh's class), and Cheng heard this magpie, you see, out in the garden plots, so Cheng flies out from his seat, and chases the magpie through the garden plots; Neil Westh was chasing after Cheng, with Cheng saying the magpie: "I'll catch you, you bugger, I'll catch you", and Neil saying: "Cheng, Cheng, come back"; of course, Cheng crashed through the garden plots, knocked the stakes over ... anyway, that was just one of the little incidents that happened.

We used to have ballroom dancing every Wednesday night.

Alan: Who were your partners?

Oh, there was Judy Kritnan(?), Carol Baxter ...

Alan: The girls who were at the school were the partners. They didn't bring people in?

No, they didn't bring people in. Mr. Hall was our teacher. The boys didn't like ballroom dancing in those days – especially when you're 12, 13 or 14 years old. I was the smallest of all that group, so we decided one night that we'd hide me under the vaulting box; it was interesting because, towards the end, I started knocking on the vaulting box, and the poor old teacher was wondering where this noise was coming from; I didn't get into much trouble (which amazed me) – I should've, I guess, but I didn't.

I think one of the sad things ... we used to go to St. Kilda Rd. every year for the break-ups - that lasted for another 6 years, and went "out the door" in the year after I

left – that was one of the big traditions that the institute lost ... the break-ups for the kids down there.

Alan: Did you feel any relationship with the place back at St. Kilda Rd. or did you ...

I still do.

Alan: Did you in those days, though? Or did you feel that you'd made a new start?

No, I think we still felt there was something there (well I did, anyway); I can't speak for others, but I think they would've...; there is, certainly, something about St. Kilda Rd. ... you know, it sort of belongs to blind people, but I feel I have a strong attachment to Burwood – I think it was a wonderful place.

I think that things started to change a little in the mid-sixties when Alf Dovey left, and we had the new headmaster. We probably started to do more of the schoolwork, should I say, that kids in sighted schools were doing – like he tried geometry, and all this sort of thing (I don't know if it did any good for people, but that's what he tried). I remember the first sports we ever had at Burwood; I was in a team called "The Hawks", and we had sports on the oval, and that, by the way, was a fantastic oval – it had a proper cinders track that we used to run around; for the "totallies" in particular, we had the straight 50 yard run – we had the wire with handles on it and we used to run along with that. I particularly remember the sports; it was at Easter time and it was on a Wednesday.

Alan: What were the events?

For the "partiallies", there was 220 run, there was a 50-yard relay, there was high-jump for the "partiallies" and "totallies", there was long-jump (we had a proper long-jump pit). In those days, we didn't have any weightlifting competition, but we did do weight training. There were also a couple of practical things, like bead threading which I guess, when you look back in hindsight, was teaching kids to use their hands. Of course, I remember the craft room, which was room 8 – Jack Smith had just taken over; Jack did a terrific job with teaching kids craft in those days – we used to do woodwork (I made a bedside tray which I had for, gosh, 14 years); we used to make baskets, bookends, and all sorts of things. Jack was very good with craftwork – teaching blind people to adapt with the tools, and so forth.

Of course, George had room 10 – he had his Steinway grand, and he had his other piano in there, and there was Arthur McKay; I remember those teachers very well. There was also the swimming sports – that started in, I think, 1963; we used to have relays, and there was an interesting method which Alf Dovey devised (particularly for the "totallies") – when it was your turn to jump in and swim the length of the pool, he'd tap you on the shoulder (obviously there was a lot of noise – kids barracking and all that sort of thing). They were very interesting, those school sports. I know we had sports against some other sighted school, but I can't remember who it was – it was somewhere in Box Hill. Of course, we had sports against St. Paul's; we at Burwood thought that we would win those sports easily, but we didn't.

Alan: Tell me about discipline; when youngsters acted up or mucked up a bit, what were the ways of disciplining you?

Matron was pretty tough; you had to do as you were told – we had rules and regulations. The older kids had to be in bed by 9:00 – that rule, certainly, never changed; I remember that they'd take your transistor off you if they caught you in bed listening to it, which I think was a bit rough – we used to listen to the football teams or the cricket (in the winter), but they'd take your transistor off you if you were caught.

We used to have a system of points – the kids with the most points at the end of the week, would get a bag of lollies.

Alan: How were the points awarded or deducted?

I think they deducted 2 at a time, if I remember correctly.

Alan: How were they awarded then?

They were awarded, basically, if you behaved yourself during the week and didn't do anything wrong. It was every Friday when used to have that. They'd take a point off if you, perhaps, didn't make your bed properly, or you were late for something, or if you'd been rude to someone in the staff; Matron Dunell was pretty heavy on that sort of stuff – she was good, she was tough, but she was fair; I think it taught kids respect, and that was very important.

Alan: Did they send you to bed early, as a form of punishment? This was always the punishment before.

Yes. If you were really acting up, they'd send you to bed early.

Alan: Like what? What was early? Did you ever get sent to bed, like I did, at 11:00 in the morning?

No, no, I never got sent to bed that early. I think the earliest I ever got sent to bed was ... I think I got sent to bed at 7:30 one night.

I guess the discipline, probably, wasn't as strong then as it was 20 or 30 years earlier.

Alan: What about discipline in school?

George Findlay was pretty ruthless if he had to be; if you were playing up, he'd come along and shake you. I don't think that I was ever kept in ... maybe I was once ... yes, I was at Burwood – I was kept in, in Don Forbes' class one day (I think it was after school for half an hour) – I can't remember what I'd done, exactly, but I know that I was kept in for half an hour or so.

I don't particularly remember myself being disciplined much at school, but there was one other kid who was, particularly – am I allowed to mention names?

Alan: Yeah!

Basil O'Sullivan (or Barry as he is now) – he was disciplined quite a bit, both in school and out of school, and I mean quite heavily.

Alan: In what ways?

Matron would give him a good whack if she had to – she really got stuck into him sometimes ... with a ruler; there were no “beg pardons”. As I said, she was pretty tough, but she was fair. I don’t think I ever got into that much trouble; I know I got into trouble for swearing, once.

Alan: Tell me, when it came to your time to leave the school, what sort of support did the institute give you, to give you direction as to where your life might go? Did they give you counselling?

No.

Alan: Did they just say: “Today’s your last day, goodbye”?

Well, I’ll tell you what happened. I was supposed to Ashwood High-School.

Alan: What age?

I was 16 – it was 1966. I was supposed to Ashwood High-School (this was when Charlie Douglas was the headmaster), and then it was decided that I wouldn’t go, and I spent another year at Burwood. I thought that was o.k. – if that’s what they decide, that’s o.k. with me. Then, 3 weeks before Christmas (it was a Friday morning and I remember that it was morning tea time), and I was called in to see Charlie Douglas, and he said: “I don’t think it’s much use for you in staying on here – we’ll send you down to the rehab”; there was no talking to my parents or anything, it was like: “you go home and tell your parents that you’re leaving school”. That was o.k. – I left there on 15th December 1966.

Alan: Were you given any sort of a farewell among the other children?

Oh, my bed was tipped upside down, my wardrobe was tipped over.

Alan: Were any speeches made, saying: “we wish you well”?

Yes, I think Neil Westh did, actually. And I remember Sue Payton (who is now Sue Davidson) coming up and wishing me good luck in whatever I did. At that stage, I didn’t have an idea of what I was going to do. I know I had an interest in piano tuning, even when I was 12 years old, but it wasn’t encouraged. As I said, I left there on the 15th of December, and on the 16th, I rang up Ralph Lightfoot, and he knew nothing about me coming down to the rehab (I was quite taken aback by that). I ended up starting there on the 23rd of January. There was a whole group of us that went from the school that year, so a lot of the kids saw each other again; the others started on February 6th, and I started on January 23rd, and I’m still not sure, to this day, why that happened.

What did you do at the rehab? How was life different for you?

Life was different because I was mixing with some older people, and rules weren’t so strict – I mean, you could go to bed, basically, when you felt like it. Of course, that

was back down at St. Kilda Rd. – I suppose I had 2 stints at St. Kilda Rd. really, except that the place had changed; the boarding conditions were a lot more comfortable. That was in 1967.

What did I do at rehab? Well, I did mobility, which I had already done at Burwood. I did typing, which I had already done at Burwood.

Alan: Going back to mobility just for a moment – we'll come back to rehab. Did every child learn mobility, or only those that they felt needed it? What format did it take? We never had that – we taught ourselves mobility.

Mobility started in 1965. The teacher's name was Mary Owen – she was the original instructor; she was a wonderful person – absolutely top class lady. Basically, we were taught how to use the long cane, around the school; we never used it during the day – we were just taught it; and then we went out around the streets. I learnt how to get home from the school.

Alan: Where was home?

It was in Ashwood, so I had to get a bus at the corner there at Station St. – I had to get a bus to Rocklands Rd., which was not far away from the school (only 5 minutes away from the school); this meant that, in those days, I could've been a day-student, but I was better off the way I was. So, I was taught how to get home and how to get to the milk bar, using the cane.

Norm, Sam and I were taught ... we did some work in the city – we went up to Frank Trainer's place; I don't know if you ever went there, Alan, or if you remember that place at all.

I think that mobility was very important because I knew nothing about public transport; we had just gone out "cold", which I suppose a lot of people did earlier.

Alan: Was this compulsory for every totally blind person? Or was it for every person – whether they could see or not?

As far as I can remember, it was (compulsory) for "totallies" in my day. There were a lot more "totallies", of course, at the school, then. There were a lot of totally blind people at the school then.

Alan: But you continued with that ... we'll get back to your rehabilitation area, then.

I did that at rehab. We did typing. We did Braille which was a waste of time – I spent more time talking; the teacher was Emmy Cameron. We did domestics, craft, and then, of course, I started learning piano tuning; do you want me to tell you anything about that?

Alan: Yes, yes.

Well, Ralph Lightfoot called me to his office one day, and we were talking about careers; at that stage, I really had no idea what I was going to do; it was February 13th – I remember it quite vividly (it was a Tuesday). No, it was February 14th, sorry. I started learning tuning, on the 21st of February; I remember that the piano tuning section was in the men's hostel, in the shed at the back – an old tin shed with a

wooden floor; it was stinking hot in the summer, and freezing cold in the winter. I remember that I used to walk there every morning, from RVIB, and I enjoyed that particular time in my life – once I knew where I was going, I really enjoyed that.

Alan: Who was looking after the piano tuning at the time?

Dick Sutcliffe.

Alan: And how was it conducted?

Well, first of all, I started on 3 hours a day, just learning, basically, pulling unisons, and learning how to set a scale. Then, I moved on to fulltime, but I was still living at the rehab. Ralph wanted me to go to the factory, and Dick said: “no way”, so anyway, that was sorted out and I never set foot in the factory.

Alan: Was Dick there all the time that you were there?

No, sometimes he'd set me some work and leave me to it, and then come back to check it out; sometimes I didn't know when he was coming. I got on very well with Dick – he and I just clicked straight away, and that was pretty important to me – it was good. I enjoyed tuning and, as I said, I knew where I was going with my career then.

Alan: How long did that training take?

2 years. But I didn't live at rehab all the time, then – I moved out in October 1967. I think rehab was very good for young blind people; it got us away from the school life, and yet it kept us in touch with those we went to school with – which I think, for blind people, was pretty important, and I presume it still is. As I said, I left there in October 1967, and I didn't live at home – I went to board in a house in Middle Park because I wanted to live near where I was working and learning tuning; I got that way of just going whenever I felt like it – do work on pianos; Dick gave me a key to the place. Then we moved from the men's hostel to the rifle range at St. Kilda Rd. (believe it or not, but that's where it was); they had these rooms at the back – these 2 tiny rooms; that's where I completed my last 8 or 9 months of piano tuning.

Alan: when you completed your tuning, how did you begin to build up a practice? Was the institute of any service to you in that?

Well, they were there but...

Alan: They acted as a booking agency.

They acted as a booking agency but...

Alan: Did you get much work through that?

No. I was starting to get a bit worried about it actually, because there wasn't much work coming in – if I did 3 pianos a week, I was doing well. I finally got a job at Allens – do you want me to tell you about that?

Alan: Oh ... no, because it's mainly about the institute. So the institute was still acting then, as a booking agency.

Yes.

Alan: But did you feel it was dropping off?

Oh, definitely.

Any reason why it was dropping off? Was there a lack of interest in it? Or a lack of tuners?

Well, let me see, who was there in those days? There was myself, there was Peter Maddox, Dick, John Leversha(?) and Jeff Smith – so there was enough tuners. I think the institute's attitude was starting to change; they were going into a new era – switchboards was the incoming thing, and the old days of piano tuning, and unfortunately, and I still don't know to this day why, piano tuning became a stigma to ... and yet, it's obviously been a good form of employment for blind people; but the attitude was definitely changing.

I remember in 1959, I moved up from Marg Farley's grade – I did prep and Grade 1 in Marg Farley's grade; I remember moving to Don Forbes' grade, and getting my own desk (I thought that was a big deal). Don had a fairly small room, I thought – we had all these desks lined up in a row, and you had your own Braille frame in there. Then, of course, we moved to the old Stainsby *, and we had those for a few years; that was until 1963 when we started to use the Perkins. In a lot of ways, I was fortunate with my schoolteacher, in that I was able to use the Braille frame, the Stainsby, and the Perkins; of course, kids can't use the Braille frame these days – they probably wouldn't know what it was (or what it is). So, I remember those little things – being able to use the Braille framer.

Alan: And the slate? **

Yes, the Taylor slate. I've still got one of the tins – I haven't got the figures, but I've got one of the tins. We didn't stop using the Taylor slate until 1965.

Alan: How did you do your maths after that?

On the Perkins.

Alan: Scratching out ...

Oh, yes. I liked the Taylor slate – I think it was very good; I guess it must've been around for a long time. I remember we had the tin of figures ...

Alan: Shake them down into the tray at the bottom ...

Oh, yes.

Alan: And some would go on the floor.

Yes. But by golly, they were around ... I can still remember how to use those; I'll never forget those.

I remember one of the readers' parties for Miss. Carr and Miss. Rodgers; there was a fellow by the name of John Capes who drank 12 bottles of coke, one night. We used to have all these things, like midnight feasts – they were a big deal at end of term; we used to put in 2 bob in those days, and we had things like rainbow cake and chocolate royals, chips, twisties, and all these sorts of things. The midnight feasts went on right through the ages, from what I can gather; it became less of a dare at Burwood, because after a while, toward the end of our school lives, Matron Dunell used to join in.

Alan: Well, that spoils the fun.

Yeah, yeah – it sort of lost the originality of it. Of course, when you're 12 or 13 years old, it's a real dare – "let's have a midnight feast"; but then, later on, it lost its ...

Alan: She actually contributed to it, and joined in.

Yes.

Alan: Oh, dear.

But for a while, it was a real dare.

Alan: Tell me about the parties for the readers at Burwood. What form did they take? Did you perform for them?

We used to have the readers' concerts, and we used to do things like, "Rinse the Blood off My Toga" ***; we'd get together little groups and do songs and things like this.

Alan: Did you give them a present?

Yes, we did – but I can't remember what the heck they were ... I wouldn't have a clue, but I know we did give them presents. They were good fun.

Alan: Quite a highlight of the year.

Yeah, and they were good fun.

Alan: The Christmas tree – do you remember the Christmas tree?

Yes, I remember the little kiddies playing ... it's really going back a bit – it was back at St. Kilda Rd. There were little kiddies playing their recorders on the stage, for the auxiliaries – it was on a Wednesday. I think it must've been at the same time as what you'd be doing today... umm

Alan: The Christmas break up.

Yeah. George used to have us prepared to do the Christmas Carols. Of course, in those days, they used to select a kid on Christmas Eve, to go and read the Christmas message at the Myer Music Bowl for the Carols by Candlelight.

Alan: How was that child selected?

Truthfully, I have no idea.

Alan: Was it by their looks, or their ability to read Braille?

I suspect that that's what it was.

Alan: Were they always girls?

No, there were boys as well. And of course, one Christmas, there was a group (I wasn't in the group) that performed for "Music For The People" on the Sunday before Christmas – they did the Toy Symphony; they had nightingales, they had toy drums, they had ... everything, gee.

Alan: Were children auditioned for this?

It was all our lot. George Findlay selected a group of children to do this. I remember Carol telling me that she played the nightingale.

Alan: What were you?

I wasn't in this – I didn't go in it.

* Stainsby is a type of hand-operated Braille machine. The Perkins is another kind of Brailier.

** The Taylor slate was one of the earliest manipulative/tactile aids for visually impaired students of mathematics.

*** "Rinse the Blood off My Toga" is a comedy skit based on Shakespeare's "Julius Caesar"