

Early Schools

Williamstown Primary School 1183 opened on January 27, 1873, in the Williamstown Mechanics Institute, Electra Street, with Mr James Russell as the school's first Headmaster.

It was reported that there were 310 pupils in attendance "all of whom were clean, decently clad, and of respectable appearance. The gutter children, if there were any in Williamstown, have not yet come to the front."

To cope with the 310 pupils Mr Russell had the assistance of one female teacher, one male teacher and two female pupil teachers. Within weeks the school was overflowing with pupils and arrangements were made for another school to be opened in the district - Williamstown North - that opened in July 1874.

Both Williamstown and Williamstown North were state schools and opened following the State Government's Education Act of 1872, which declared that schooling in Victoria for all children would be free, secular and compulsory.

Prior to this Act, education had been catered for by a small number of church schools or private individuals who had operated in the district since 1838.

Current Site

On July 31, 1874, the Education Department purchased part of the site of the Market Reserve from the Williamstown Borough Council. By this time there were over 1,000 children enrolled at the school taught by the headmaster Mr Russell, seven assistant teachers and eight pupil teachers. During term three in 1878 the school moved into the bluestone building on its current site.

Our Stone School House 1878

On 31/12/1876 the Minister for Education approved the plans for the construction of a school in stone or brick to house approximately 800 pupils. Stone was readily available in the district and stone masons still resided in the area. The school proved to be one of the last major stone constructions in the area and the stone used was quarried from the site.

Beanland and Spencer of James Street, Williamstown were the successful tenderers.

The first problem encountered was the positioning of the school on the block. A water pipeline ran diagonally across the school grounds and had to be replaced before the school could be located facing Cecil Street and towards the business area of Nelson Place.

The original completion date was November 1877 but alterations and delays, (such as gas connections for lighting, but not heating), meant it did not open until September 3, 1878, with a number of finishing touches still required.

The school was enormously important to the community. Local tradespeople were given a half-day holiday and local schools closed as the community attended the opening ceremony. Military bands entertained the crowds and the Minister of Education attended. Buildings were decorated with flags and on the Market Reserve were merry-go-rounds, shooting galleries as well as lolly and fruit hawkers.

The school was considered one of the stateliest in the country and a complete model, including all internal fittings, was sent to exhibitions in London and Paris.

The Russell Era 1873 -1892

Changes to the school continued throughout its early years although many of these changes were hard won - a little like today!

Within weeks of the school opening two 400 gallon water tanks were sought, as water shortages were a problem. A timber fence around the school perimeter was requested to "keep out the local unemployed youths", along with tree planting and asphaltting due to the quagmire around the buildings following rain. The grounds were such a problem at this time that the School Board of Advice suggested that unless asphaltting was carried out they would strongly recommend that the school return to the Mechanics Institute for the winter months!

During the summer months the excessive heat in the classrooms at the Parker Street end, where the infant school was located, was such that Headmaster Russell requested frosted glass windows.

Russell was highly regarded in the community and Education Department records suggest that the “teachers were doing their work well” and that “many new teachers of the most promising type were coming forward”.

In July 1892 James Russell reluctantly retired after nearly twenty years as headmaster. He had established the school as one of the best in the district and a major training site for pupil teachers. Following lessons on July 25 the children assembled at the front of the school to bid Mr Russell farewell. A colleague, Mr Fowler, presented Russell with a silver tea and coffee service as an expression of respect and appreciation. Russell died early 1900.

1892 - the Great War

James Elvrams replaced Russell in difficult economic circumstances. The depression was at its worst and schools struggled for resources. Married female teachers were retrenched or retired and Williamstown PS took over control of Spotswood Primary to help cut costs.

In 1895 Charles Bradley was appointed Headmaster and remained at 1183 for nearly twenty years. During this period, to celebrate the new century, many schools in the district erected flagpoles. Our flagpole still stands at the front of the school however the original was situated closer to Cecil Street. At the time it was the envy of others, being the tallest in a State school in Victoria.

Conditions at the school were often difficult; there were problems with drainage, sanitation, water supply, ventilation and lighting. Poor drainage caused problems with foundations and flooring, eventually resulting in the destabilisation and subsequent demolition of the spire at the Parker Street end of the school many years later. Old inventory records from this time indicate a severe shortage of equipment, much of which was in poor condition.

Typically absenteeism was a problem in the early years of education in Victoria with often less than half of the enrolled students attending. However by the early 1900s school attendance was far more regular and around 900 children were attending daily, causing problems of overcrowding. The School Board sought additional premises and fortunately was able to find a most suitable structure across the road - 52 Pasco Street, a site previously used as the Girls High School.

On December 7, 1904, a deputation from the Board of Advice and the local Member of Parliament, J.Lennon, met the Minister and requested that junior classes, up to fourth class, attend Newport School. This request was denied however funding was received for the construction of a junior school building, south of the original building. Work commenced in 1905 and the building was opened in 1906. This is now known as “the red brick building”, the feature being a most handsome assembly hall.

The condition of the original building continued to worsen. The Principal Mr. Bradley wrote on 2/3/1914, “I have the honour to inform you that the cracks in the north east corner...are increasing...(and)...that the passage door is not, on any account, to be opened.” After much agitation from the School Board the school received a visit from the Minister of Education in April 1914. Approval for renovations to the original building was granted immediately. Plans were drawn up to increase the window size, add front and rear doors for the corridors and improve the general condition of the building. Some of the original gothic windows remain although during this work, many windows were “squared”.

The Great War

During the war there was a shortage of male teachers throughout Victoria as approximately half of the eligible male teachers volunteered for military service. Around twenty percent of these were killed. Female teacher numbers increased dramatically in this period and immediately after the war.

Not surprisingly government spending on education was effected by the war. Fundraising efforts were often directed towards supporting the troops and schools contributed some of the comforts and supplies such as knitted socks, sandbags, food parcels and wrote many letters to

those on active service or recovering. A paper shortage required students and teachers ensure they wrote on both sides of the paper and refrain from waste.

An honour board on the northern end of the bluestone building commemorates the sacrifice of past students.

In 1916 Charles Bradley retired and unfortunately died soon after. As with Russell before him, Bradley was well regarded by the community and old scholars and students heavily attended his funeral.

Between the Wars

In many ways, much at Williamstown PS remained similar from after the Great War through until the forties, even into the fifties. Resources were always hard won as the school weathered the Depression of the thirties and the Second World War.

The curriculum remained much the same throughout these decades, as did the class sizes, which were invariably large by today's standards. Typically the children were seated in two-seater desks in rows with a platform at the front of the room, a blackboard, chalk and a map. They saluted the King and flag on Monday mornings... "I love God and my country...", studied for the Merit Certificate and were taught by a combination of teachers and student teachers.

In 1919 Melbourne was struck with the dreaded Spanish flu. At the height of the outbreak the school was closed and used as a makeshift hospital for the ill.

In the 1920s the Girls Secondary School was established in the red brick building and the infant grades crowded back into the bluestone building. This remained the Girls School until 1962 when it relocated to Bayview Street.

The Mothers' Club was founded in 1924 and has remained a strong and important part of the school throughout the century.

During the Second World War trenches were dug on the oval and the armed forces took over three classrooms on the Hanmer Street side of the building for first aid. During this time they installed hot water for the first time at the school.

The 50's and 60's

In many ways the post-war decades can be seen as having greatly altered the face of Australia and Williamstown PS was certainly a part of the changes.

George Hird was Principal from 1948 - 1960 and guided the school through the post-war migrant intake when once again the numbers swelled at the school as the new students were bussed in from hostels nearby. In 1954 two LTC classrooms and a male staffroom were attached to the front of the bluestone building. (Thankfully these were removed and the building repaired in around 1990). As well during this time, some of the slipping slates were removed from the bell tower and replaced by galvanised iron. In 1949 the much-remembered daily half pint of milk was supplied for all the children.

Interestingly George Hird these days is perhaps remembered as much for his Principalship as he is for being the great grandfather of the Essendon footballer and Brownlow Medallist, James Hird.

From the 70's

As well as the football team all having long hair, there were some significant changes to the school in the seventies. 1973 saw the school celebrate its centenary and in December 1974 the school opened the JT Grey Library. This building also housed new girls and boys toilets and the old toilets were removed from near the Reserve and the corner of Parker St and Electra Street.

Some of the more dramatic changes to the school occurred during the eighties and early nineties. In the mid eighties the administration area was remodelled and enlarged. Two classrooms were replaced with much needed office space and ceilings were lowered. In 1990 the school underwent a major refurbishment which significantly restored many of the wonderful features of the original building. The LTCs were removed from the front of the school, the rooms stripped

and repainted in heritage colours and the shelter shed and other dilapidated timber structures were removed. In 1998 the school canteen was relocated to make way for a much needed classroom.

Through the years

Bluestone, building plans and renovations have all been important to the history of 1183 but probably never as important as the memories, the stories, the games and the characters that have made the school. There could never be enough space to record them all but perhaps a few...

Games and Sport

Willy South has a proud sporting tradition. The school has fielded teams in football, netball, rounders and athletics for much of its history. Not surprisingly St Mary's and Willy North have been the major rivals - and remain so today! Within the school there have always been yo-yos, marbles and some might remember gutterball.

The Cot Fund

In 1927, May Brewer, a teacher at 1183, drowned while trying to save a pupil swimming at the local baths. A commemorative plaque and the establishment of a "cot fund" honour her memory. This fund continued for many years with the money raised by the students being donated to Williamstown Hospital to purchase a cot and later humidicribs for the infant ward.

Scholarships

Scholarships sponsored by many of the local businesses were very much a part of the school's history. Up to twenty scholarships were awarded to grade six children heading to secondary school. The Honour Board at the entrance to the school lists the names of the school dux from 1948.

Characters

The truth is unlikely to get in the way of most characters, so take from these stories and descriptions what you will...

"I had three Principals whilst at 1183, Mr Willis, a small Mr Pickwick type who rode his bike to school and rested his gladstone bag and his tummy on the handlebars...and George Hird, tall and thin, large hands and a loud voice that scared the daylight out of me."(46 - 52)

"In the old fashioned wooden desk there were inkwells and we wrote in either pencil or ink with blotting paper. We were totally forbidden to use biros. My friend received the strap because he was found to have used a biro instead of pencil."

"Many students forgot to take their change from their lunch order bags so money was always being burnt in the incinerator. The ashes were always dumped behind the boys toilets and there were commonly up to twenty boys scavenging in the ashes for coins."(50s and 60s)

"The staffroom was so small you used to have to keep your elbows in when drinking your cup of tea....there was no hot water or facility to boil water at the school and the caretaker had to bring the teachers' morning pot of tea from her house across the road, wrapped in towels to keep it warm." (Before the WW11)

"There was quite a bit of rivalry between North and South and with St Mary's over the road. We used to call ourselves South or 1183. But the Catholics always had it over us because they went to grade eight and we only went to grade six."

"Just down on the Cecil Street corner was a huge bike shed and the gum tree outside, (the Welcome In), was our cricket wicket."

"And we didn't have a canteen in those but over the road on either corner there was a shop and on the way to school we would order our lunch and at lunchtime we would go and get our lunches." (1950s)

George Hird was Principal from 1948 - 1960 and these days perhaps is remembered as much for his Principalship as he is for being the great grandfather of the Essendon footballer and Brownlow Medallist, James Hird. During this time some of the slipping slates were removed from the bell tower and replaced by galvanised iron.

Our School Now

Currently Williamstown is undergoing a surge in student numbers. With the high quality programs being offered by the school and many new families moving into the area, the school has grown dramatically over the past few years. Currently there are just fewer than 450 students, (six years ago there were around 250). Three relocatable classrooms arrived at the beginning of 1997 and the canteen was "re-converted" to a classroom in 1998. While there is always room for improvement, (and a little extra space would help!), the school buildings are in good condition.

To celebrate the new century many schools in the district erected flagpoles. The original flagpole was situated closer to Cecil Street and was the envy of others, being the tallest in the state of Victoria.

The first Rhodes Scholarship was awarded in 1904 to Sir John Clifford Ballantyne Behan from Caulfield Grammar, a pupil at Williamstown PS in the late 1880's. As well, a Mr Wilcher from South Australia was also a Rhodes Scholar and attended the school.

While we can not claim any recent Rhodes scholars, many past pupils, both old and recent, have earned themselves scholarships at some of Melbourne's highly regarded state and private schools and universities.

Principals of Williamstown Primary School

1873 -1892	James Ewing Russell
1892 -1895	James Elvrams
1895 -1916	Charles Bradley
1916	

1948 -1960	George Hird
1960 - 1969	John Browne
1970 - 1971	William O'Grady
1972 - 1974	Jim Rutherford
1975	George Briggs
1976	Kenneth McCallum
1977 - 1980	Norman Grant
1981 - 1984	Gary Rodgers
1985 - 1987	John Taylor
1988 - 1990	Terry Kingston
1991	Des Walsh
1992 -1997	Margaret Wilson
1997	Tilly Barger